Est. 1929

by leslielol

Summary

Raylan and Tim share two dates, a year apart.

Notes

- The characters belong to the show's creators, I mean no harm.
- The title refers to the George Rogers Clark Memorial Bridge in Louisville, Kentucky.
- This is very much a work in progress, and may have archive warnings for violence in later chapters.
- For my pal, slashmyheartandhopetoporn! Thank you for all the laughs and the TRAGIC, TRAGIC HEADCANONS. And of course, for fielding my queries about this fic. You're a peach!
Chapter 1

“You and Winona. Is that a thing again?” Tim asked the question to the Interstate ahead of them, and didn’t initially realize Raylan was serving him a look flatter than last week’s roadkill. “What? You told Art about it.”

“Accidentally, because I thought you’d--forget it.” Like most things Raylan found he had to explain about himself, it sounded profoundly stupid.

Tim bristled. “Why would I run to Art with something stupid I saw you doing on your night off?”

There was the promise of solidarity in Tim’s plain reasoning. Raylan did genuinely appreciate it—at least insomuch as he was rapidly losing Art’s patience. As far as Raylan was concerned, he couldn’t help his behavior—nature and nurture both about covered it.

To have somehow curried the favor of another—well, it was a pleasant surprise.

“I said to Winona that we should have invited you over.”

Tim smirked at that. “And leave my date out in the cold? That’s rude.”

“Oh.” Raylan tried to mask his surprise with just the bare minimum congratulatory enthusiasm, but couldn’t break past doubt. “I didn’t see her.”

“Blonde,” Tim said, as if to jog Raylan’s memory. “‘Bout my height. Got a big ol’ dick.”

It took Raylan a moment, but he laughed softly. He very nearly said, Sorry it didn’t work out, because Tim’s description seemed like the kind of bizarre thing he’d come back with when such was the case. Raylan remembered once Art had facilitated a particularly mismatched pairing of Tim and a young law assistant from the second floor.

She didn’t smell enough like mom, was Tim’s straight-faced explanation for why the whole date went south in the first half hour.

Instead, Raylan heard himself say, “Sounds like a keeper.”

Tim smiled at that, perhaps wider than was necessary for the line.

It was somehow still a shock to Raylan that, two weeks later, Tim would find a lull in an office-wide Thanksgiving potluck to fill with the simple, slightly boozy declaration—Any of you assholes know I’m gay? Show of hands.

And Raylan thought, Well, now.

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In 2005, Georgia Fuller married her husband, Rosco Hex. Georgia would not take his surname, in large part because her sister Andrea worked with an accomplished stripper called Georgia Hex down in Nashville, hand to god. In 2015, on the morning of their tenth anniversary, Georgia escaped from the women’s prison in Shelbyville, Kentucky—incapacitating two guards in the process. She was a romantic like that.
By the very same afternoon, Georgia was back in the arms of her husband, himself under house arrest for more recent (and continued) misdeeds at a local golf course.

That was where Deputy Marshal Raylan Givens and Chief Deputy Rachel Brooks found the happy couple. They went in fast and hard with a raid team, the understanding being that the two had access to a verifiable arsenal in the household. Sure enough, they found the weapon cache at the foot of the bed the married couple were currently sharing, fucking with the kind of intensity and focus that they didn't immediately register company. With the kind of love, too, that didn't respond well to anyone trying to tear them apart.

And amidst their outbursts--some verbally vile, some physical, some organic--they nevertheless sustained a ferocious intimacy.

Rachel, being the only woman in the team, took it upon herself to wrangle Georgia into submission, a robe, and cuffs. It wasn’t the cleanest of tasks. By its end, Rachel registered no fewer than three… substances streaking her arms and shirtsleeves.

"Sort of touching, ain't it?" Raylan smiled at Rachel as she handed off Georgia to another Deputy from the raid team. There was blessedly too-little space in Raylan’s car for the happy couple, as Raylan had smartly laid claim to the cache of weapons, which now occupied the length of the backseat.

Rachel served him a withering look. "Is that supposed to be a joke? Because I will fire your ass if that's supposed to be a joke."

“This ain’t the kind of shit a Chief Deputy should be doing,” Raylan said in agreement, then opened the passenger side door for Rachel. It was polite enough as a gesture, but they both knew Raylan only sought to limit contamination.

“You’re preaching to the choir, Raylan.” Rachel elbowed open the glove compartment and retrieved a pack of baby wipes. She started with her hands and forearms.

By the time Raylan circled the car and took his seat, Rachel had burned through half the pack. Smiling amusedly, Raylan asked, “Tim still on leave?”

It was the intended, complementary thought to his first statement, yet it dropped like a bomb into the small space they shared, now, smelling of another couple's sweaty sex.

Rachel's hands stalled in their important work. She sighed, “Why do you ask me shit like that?”

Raylan shrugged. “Keeping up appearances.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Rachel grinned. Tim could be quiet as a church mouse, but Raylan would sooner write up his own sermon for the congregation to hear. He couldn’t keep their relationship secret more than a few months. Rachel was surprised that didn’t end it. “I can’t tell you what the shrink said. You know that.”

“I ain’t worried,” Raylan said, his tone light. “He’s watching Willa for the day.”

Rachel closed her eyes and for a moment, imagined a world in which her senior-most Marshal wasn't a complete idiot. “Oh, Raylan--”

“I’m kidding. I knew there was a real answer in there, somewhere.” Raylan's smile disappeared into a thin line. It wasn’t panic he heard in Rachel’s strict tone, but it was something damn close. “That bad, huh?”
"I really can't say," Rachel insisted. She hoped to salvage what she could of the situation--specifically, to obscure the opinion she had unintentionally shared. But as surely as Raylan and Tim were her Deputies, they were also her friends. "But maybe you should give it a while before you ask."

“It’s been two days,” Raylan said, though there was no sense reminding her. Tim’s absence from the office was, in part, the reason she was out in the field, getting her hands dirty.

“How does he seem with you?”

The way Rachel asked--like she saw Tim and Raylan’s relationship as some wholly unique entity, far-removed from their work--was either something she truly believed, or at least pretended to, for the sake of a unified office. She didn’t have the resources to split them apart, and a transfer wasn’t ideal. Specifically, she doubted she could find anyone to take Raylan.

(“Because Tim?" she’d said when they’d all congregated some months ago to clear the air. “I’ve got him schooled just how I like. I’m keeping Tim.”)

Raylan couldn’t fault her, either, if she simply put off making arrangements because she assumed the thing wouldn’t last. The fact that Raylan was having trouble answering her question spoke to her point.

He stared down the road and considered the matter broadly. Tim could tell a genuine truth and have it sound like a lie--and just the same, couch platitudes between the sheets of their bed, spin stories for pillow talk. Half of what Tim said about himself--of this, Raylan was certain--was just a collection of words, spliced pieces of what he’d like to think was genuine and the parts he wished were farthest from the truth.

Once, Raylan was channel surfing and stopped on a news story out of the Middle East--a series of car bombs and scores dead, blame lobbed between sects and powers alike.

“That fucking shithole,” Tim had muttered, although Raylan had tuned into the piece too late to hear where the bombing even occurred. Still, that was Tim’s word on the matter, although he did not expand on it, and never once pulled his nose out of his book: *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward Said*.

When he wasn’t lying, though, or couldn’t be bothered to try--his behavior was fairly difficult to overlook.

“Quiet,” Raylan answered, but that wasn’t quite the word. “Despondent.”

“Well, there’s something for the performance review,” Rachel said. “Tim’s nothing if not consistent.”

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It wasn't always fun, and never easy. Tim didn't make it easy, which was right in Raylan's wheelhouse. He was like teflon to Raylan’s charm, returning every kind word with spitting sarcasm because he misread Raylan's intent--willfully, sometimes, but most often not. Trading barbs and insults was, curiously, a new kind of foreplay for Raylan. Tim liked talking shit over just talking, which was a welcome departure after Raylan's previous fare: promises for Ava, vows to Winona, explanations for all the rest. Tim was simpler; he didn't ask for anything. Raylan used to think that'd be a problem--he aimed to please, and came to feel useless without a task.

But that was a passing phase, anyway, and soon Raylan began to appreciate the steadiness, Tim's
emotional consistency. The partnership, as definitive as it was in the office and the field. It inevitably drained the novelty from what they were doing, and set the foundations for something stable. And when that didn’t turn Raylan away…

Tim had a line about that, dragged it out like a dead body from the backyard shed when Raylan got fidgety or careless. Raylan found he never actually heard it—rather, it was just the tone of Tim’s voice he recognized, the gentle cadence buzzing as background noise to Raylan’s disjointed thoughts. The doubts and stalled moments were never enough to end things. In fact, stacked against the good times, they were damn near forgettable.

Every now and again, when their endeavor felt worthwhile, it felt like nothing but.

There were moments Tim really came alive with Raylan. Smiled small and laughed loud, and even let his guard down a little. Times, too, where Raylan could be very quiet, his grip very hard, and Tim would know simply to hold on.

Raylan moved in practically by accident, and Tim never told him to leave. A key was offered out of necessity ("I gotta be at your beck and call? No, man, let your own self the fuck in."), and the rest fell silently into place.

Tim was playing a video game when Raylan returned with Willa to their apartment--Tim’s apartment, although he has ceded space in the bedroom, living room, and bathroom. Over time, Raylan had amassed a whole two dresser drawers, half the closet space, and Tim didn’t even jump down his throat when he dumped his socks and underwear in with Tim’s. Even Willa's occasional presence left a mark--toys in the living room, diapers under the bathroom sink, specialty detergents in the laundry room and, most notably, a crib.

The videogame was muted, and Raylan’s only clue as to what Tim was doing on the couch— if not jerking off--was the intense stare he had fixed on the opposite wall, and the glow of light playing across his unblinking face. Raylan took Willa into the bedroom and put her down in her crib, then returned to his other dependent.

Tim paused the game as soon as Raylan came close.

"She asleep?"

"I have been informed that Willa saw a dog at the sitter's. After all that excitement? She's out like a light."

Before Raylan had the opportunity to ask after Tim’s day, Tim’s hands were at his hips. He pulled back the belt, thumbed open the fly, and tugged Raylan’s jeans down just enough to open a spread for himself. Tim pressed into Raylan, who was as good as stood before him like a meal.

“Happy to see me?” Raylan asked, amused. But he had nothing further to say when Tim opened his mouth for him, and began to suck him off. His grip moved from Raylan's hips to his ass, so as to practically hold Raylan upright, keep him in place. Tim got him hard with his mouth and the occasional, hurried tug. Raylan was easy to get off--Tim always thought he was just waiting for it. All day, every day, he lived only in wait of a gifted release.

Tim swallowed in spite of that fact. If Raylan’s dick was as big as his ego, Tim would have a broken jaw as pliant as putty.

It was fast, not an exchange Raylan was meant to luxuriate in. He came with a jerk of his hips and a stifled groan, then tipped forward and planted his hands on Tim's shoulders, steadying himself.
Finished, Tim positioned Raylan out of his line of sight to the television and returned to his game.

It wasn’t often Raylan deciphered a hidden message behind a blowjob, but now Tim made his clear: a sort of, *stop walking on eggshells around me.* Raylan wasn’t there to see the shooting, was yet to hear of its finer details, but knew it must have been something awful because Tim took the time off without objection. And, perhaps most damningly, he gave Raylan unearned head. Not a move to pull if he was keen to assume an air of normalcy.

Whatever the reason, the experience left his legs weak, and Raylan dropped into place beside Tim on the couch.

"You smell," Raylan said, leaning into Tim and taking him in. "How long's it been since you had a shower?" He planted a hand on Tim's thigh, then, to drive home the point that his query had attached to it an invitation.

"I just came back from the gym," Tim said, addressing the stink, but not Raylan's question. The invitation was a lost cause. His gaze was steady and drawn ahead, his fingers flitting over the controller like lightning.

“Oh, I can tell.”

Raylan was teasing--there wasn’t anything to leer at when Tim was dressed in stained sweats. Moreso, when he was in stiff competition for which had gone the longest without seeing soap and water.

It wasn’t often that Raylan caught Tim looking disheveled: Tim woke with the sun, leaving Raylan only the odd instance to wake with him. Even drunk--an occurrence as routine as the waking, but nearer and dearer to Raylan's purview--Tim kept some midicum of respectability. So Raylan looked on, steadily, at his partner. Tim neither flinched under his scrutiny nor gave any back. The focus on his video game was resolute.

“Go on a date with me,” Raylan said. He’d shake Tim, yet.

Tim frowned, then proceeded to make a face as though he got a whiff of his own stink, himself. “I just sucked your dick for nothin’, now you want romance, too?’”

Raylan pressed his nose into the soft skin behind Tim’s ear. “Next weekend. We’ll go up to Louisville.”

“Mm. What’s in it for me?”

Raylan started to do this god-awful thing to Tim’s neck that Tim loved, but had the good sense to put a stop to. Knowing he’d be under the microscope curbed his easy approach to time spent with Raylan. It wasn't a difficult decision: bruising above his shirt collar would garner all the wrong kinds of attention, which Tim needed less than he deserved any momentary reprieve. Tim spidered his left hand--not his dominant, which was still maneuvering the video game controller--and fit it against the whole of Raylan’s face. Tim pushed him away.

“Nah,” Tim said. He went back to killing Nazi zombies.

“It’s not until next week,” Raylan protested, like Tim couldn't have a thought now and mean to keep it a whole seven days.

“I’m anticipating not wanting to go then, either.”
“Tim.”

“Raylan.” Tim said it in that halting tone--the same one that asks dully, *Are we really gonna do this? Argue?* Tim knew it didn't necessarily win him anything, but it shut Raylan up. That had to be some kind of victory.

With a prolonged sigh--he felt at most postponed, not defeated--Raylan took up the second controller, and Tim dutifully began a new game they both could play. Raylan was somewhat surprised by Tim's choice of game. Usually, he was all about the seizure-inducing lights and twinkly sounds of Super Mario Kart. The moody atmosphere of the first-person shooter game was a little on the nose, Raylan thought.

"Talked to Rachel today," Raylan offered while choosing his character’s weapon. Bazooka, that seemed fun. "Said you'd gone to pieces during your therapy session."

Tim didn't let Raylan bait him. Coolly, he drawled, "Literally neither of those things happened."

In retaliation for Tim not retaliating, Raylan let his character get shot to shit.

“Fucker,” Tim spat. "Look what you’ve done--the Nazis are winning. We said never again, Raylan. Never again.”

Although he continued to play without Raylan's combined efforts, Tim caved first. He always ended up answering for what Raylan wanted. “We been on dates before--”

Raylan was ready for him, and quipped: “Sure, I remember it. A Friday night back in April, you said you were busy. I went to a movie, and there you were.”

“See,” Tim said. They'd had this exact conversation before. "We're spontaneous.”

Playing up his shunned-lover routine, Raylan pressed, “I can’t go to a movie with you?”

“You talk too much,” Tim said. “During movies, too.”

He punched at the controller more, laid waste to a stronghold of enemy fighters.

“If there’s something you want up in Louisville, fine, don’t bullshit me. I just know it ain’t a date.”

“You can’t know that,” Raylan said. Tim's obstinate attitude was beginning to test his patience.

“I know you.”

It was unmistakable--Tim's comment was meant as a slight. Raylan took a moment, stretched out the silence so that Tim could imagine all the sharp comebacks Raylan wasn't making, was *too kind* to make. Then he started up again, determined to win Tim's company, if not his favor. “That bar you like. Some music, that place--with the ribs?--for dinner. We’ll drive back the next morning.”

“Uh-huh. And when do we knock in some fugitive's hobbit hole?”

“If the situation presents itself,” Raylan allowed, his tone light. He threw an arm around Tim's shoulders, watched the screen as Tim maneuvered around a digital landscape, thwarting the ideological and undead. "I want to get out of town, too."

Finally, Tim stopped the game. "Something happen?"

He lost half the vowels, and it sounded more like a questionable breakfast cereal. *Sum'n hap’n?*
It had surprised them both--although they never actively spoke of it--that Raylan bore the brunt of the commentary, intrigue, and insults from the broader law enforcement community after word got around. It made enough sense: Raylan had the bigger personality, the presence, the name recognition. Instinctively, people wanted to tear him down a peg.

Tim was secretly a little relieved--he thought Raylan handled the behavior well. He was a cool one-liner or a profoundly dismissive look whereas Tim had always been prone to flat, angry stares and fuckin’ fuck you toos. It was a bizarre turn for him; like he’d emotionally time-traveled back to middle school--the last place anyone dared to call him a faggot, whether they knew the truth or not. He tended to look affronted, first--almost hurt, of all things. It was a source of constant teasing from Raylan, too, that Tim could keep a straight face in all other matters, save for this one.

Raylan smiled wryly. He knew what Tim was thinking, and was glad for once not to be in a position to confirm it.

He drawled, loose like a joke, “Yeah, there’s this sadsack at work. Shot and killed a man, now he’s having some kind of breakdown about it.”

“What a pussy,” Tim agreed, and although his game was paused, he stared--sort of sated--at the screen.

Once the intrigue faded, and most couldn’t place when such a strange partnership started--or if indeed it had already ended, a flash in the pan, a joke taken too far then abandoned, its players no longer amused with it, themselves--Tim and Raylan had found a bizarre kind of peace. Like they’d willed compliance without having to lift a trigger-finger. Rachel explained it as acceptance, but Tim was wary. He felt that way, now.

Because if it wasn’t other people causing Raylan grief, then it was only Tim.

But guilt had never been a driving force for Tim the way it was for Raylan. Tim was sure in the relationships he forged with other people--fewer now than he’d once had, but still carefully erected and maintained. Guilt was the product of abusing those bonds, and Tim took extreme care not to make such mistakes. Raylan, on the other hand, was perpetually a student in that respect, never quite proficient.

Still adamant about what he needed not being what Raylan wanted, Tim found himself another escape: "I may just head out for a few days."

He leaned forward, squared his shoulders and rested his elbows on his knees, tired. He let the controller slip and dangled it by its chord just an inch above the the floor. Had he let it go, the clatter would have surely awoken Willa.

Raylan leaned back, putting himself and Tim at complete physical odds. Then, like he was disappointed, even surprised, he asked, “Really?”

Tim had pulled the same disappearing act a couple times since Raylan moved in. Facts being what they were--Tim disappearing after a rough patch, no further explanation, no entertaining Raylan’s questions--Raylan figured he was shacking up with someone else. The disbelief in his voice, then, stemmed from the fact that Tim would even allude to it--so plainly, if at all, if ever.

It must have showed on his face.

“What,” Tim said. He wasn’t even facing Raylan, but could tell there’d been a shift between them, something lost. He felt its absence like a chill.
“Nothing.”

"That's a highly suspect nothing."

Tim, Raylan decided, was just begging to be nailed on this. He wanted a fight to distract him from his mood and self-pity. Never one to squander a confrontation, Raylan decided to settle in, and hoped at least it would distract them both. "You ever gonna tell me this fella’s name?"

The question--the accusation, really--hung between them for a moment. Tim narrowed his eyes like an explanation was scribbled on the far wall behind Raylan’s head.

“...Mother nature? Jesus, Raylan. I go camping.” Tim waited for that one to land before addressing what really and truly kept him from accepting that this was the best Raylan could come up with: “You think I’d take a sleeping bag to a booty call?”

Raylan shrugged, grinned. At least they were talking, even if the topic was assumed infidelity. “Not everyone likes you as much as I do.”

He leaned forward and pinched Tim’s cheek, which was something he did now because Tim was unflappable in all else, save for this childish affront. True to form, he shoved Raylan's hand away, a gentler response than last time's, when Tim twisted the offending arm like he meant to snap its very bones.

“I even told you I was camping. Last time.”

“But see, it still sounds like a shitty lie,” Raylan reasoned, giddier still that this was what was going to draw Tim from his dark funk.

“Well now I’m offended.” Tim leveled his gaze to meet Raylan's, who was surprised by the coldness there. His brow was set in a hard line and his eyes seemed clouded and small. There was no evidence that they’d traded jokes, not now or ever. “First you think I got a side piece, and now you think I couldn’t lie about it if I wanted to?”

Raylan smiled a little, trying for warm, but landing somewhere temperate. “My sincerest apologies, Tim. Really.”

Tim wet his lips and then said, like he’d never once mistaken Raylan’s comment for anything other than a serious indictment: “There hasn’t been anybody else.”

“Oh?”

“Oh,” Tim repeated. “Like you ain’t pleased as punch.”

“I’m surprised,” Raylan said, and his eyebrows jumped to accommodate that notion.

“Really.” Tim sounded doubtful. “You think my two-day-old sweatpants got broad appeal?”

“I think you, out of ‘em, could turn a few heads.”

Raylan pitched his voice low, let the compliment drip from his lips like honey. Tim gave him a half-smile for his efforts.

“Is there a kill switch for you?”

“Ah, nothing’s stuck to me yet.”
With a few swift clicks on the controller, Tim ended the stalled game and left the television free for Raylan’s use. Then, he heaved himself up and off the couch—perhaps the first attempt in quite some time—tugged at the waist of his sweats, and flashed an asscheek at Raylan as he headed towards the bathroom.

“For your troubles,” Tim drawled, and Raylan was quick to lean forward and swat him.

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After a slapdash supper and a few too many fingers of bourbon, the evening disappeared into night. Tim showered first, largely due to Raylan's insistence that Tim wasn't about to get into bed with him if he didn't—not tonight or any other night. Raylan's turn was cut short by Willa's crying. She always got fussy late in the evening, but could usually be counted on to make it through until morning, after.

Her wails had soothed just as Raylan bid a hasty exit from the bathroom. Tim had drawn Willa into his arms and was rocking her gently. He murmured nonsense at her: "What's that, girl? Billy's fallen into the well? That Billy. What a drunken asshole. Don't waste your breath on that asshole Billy.'"

Raylan waited in the bedroom doorway until Tim put Willa down again, silent and sleeping fitfully. Tim stood over her crib, watching her.

"She alright?"

"She's perfect."

Raylan remained in the doorway. "You alright?"

Tim continued to stare down at the child and asked, "What'd you do today?" Then he turned to face Raylan, squinted at him in the dark. "I didn't ask."

"Went with Rachel and a raid team to retrieve this female escapee." Raylan ended his explanation there, deciding not to share the excitement with Tim, lest he get started on criminal love affairs and copious amounts of bodily juices and make Tim jealous.

"Oh." But Tim could put Raylan and raid team together and know to expect something more than a routine day. "You shoot anyone?"

"Not this time."

Tim nodded, returned his focus to Willa. “I can watch her tomorrow. You don’t have to keep gettin’ fleeced by that babysitter.”

“Okay,” Raylan said easily, although he was doubtful. “Remind me in the morning.”

“What is that, a no?” Raylan would have thought nothing of Tim calling out his bullshit answer, had he not raised his voice. Tim wasn’t that absent-minded—to talk about the baby, loudly, and in close proximity to said baby. He continued, louder still: “You gonna forget I’m here and just walk out the door with your kid?”

“Tim.” Raylan kept his tone low and deceptively cool. “Shut the fuck up.”
Tim didn’t sleep that night. He lifted Raylan’s errant arm off his chest and traded the bedroom for the living room, where he sat with a bowl of cereal watching late-night cartoons on mute.

Raylan found him after an hour or so, disturbed by his absence. He dropped that arm over him again, leaned in and put his nose against Tim’s throat. Although finally washed, it was unshaved, which made Raylan smile. Tim was a hairy bastard, most of it soft. But his facial hair grew in patchy and sharp. He always said he’d had a stupid blonde beard for far too long, and he’d never suffer that particular affliction again. He shaved everyday, sometimes twice.

“Shouldn’t have killed that guy,” Tim said, answering ahead of Raylan’s unspoken question. He was particular about those things—not making Raylan ask how he was. Not that Raylan wouldn’t; Tim just preferred to head off the conversation.

“Mm. This one of mine or one of yours?” Raylan asked, playing dumb. He thought it might help to remind Tim that they do the same work, meet the same bloody outcomes.

Tim hooked an index finger towards himself, seemingly without irony. “He wasn’t armed.”

“He had a gun.”

“It wasn’t loaded.”

“You couldn’t know that.” Raylan ran a hand over his face. He was too tired for this shit. He’d have thought all the drinking about covered it, anyway. Tim put away a good amount of the bottle. “He had hostages.”

“Again, with his unloaded gun. Why don’t I go take out the whole cast of Law & Order?”

“If it’ll get you back on that horse,” Raylan cracked, but Tim wasn’t having his jokes tonight. “How’d your therapy session go? You tell her all this?”

Tim frowned, like he still couldn’t fathom his own answer. “I didn’t say one goddamn word.”

"Okay. You realize your error, then?"

“I was thinking.”

None too quickly, Raylan thought, but held his tongue. This was a mess Tim had seemingly gone out of his way to make for himself. “What’d she say, then?”

"She wants me to go to real therapy."

"Probably not the term she used." Raylan figured pretty quickly that meant outside help, perhaps a specialist. "Okay, so you see a therapist. Sit on someone else’s couch for a while. Work through your homicidal intent on the good people on Law & Order."

"No, I don’t think so."

"I doubt this was just her friendly advice, Tim.” If Raylan could guess that there was now a requirement over Tim’s head, some requisite action on his part before he could return to work, Tim undoubtedly knew that much, and then some.

He drew in a long, steadying breath. He was quiet for a time--probably thinking again. "Yeah. No."

“Mhm. You tell me Monday how that works out for you.” It was Raylan’s intent, then, to return to bed. He had to work in the morning, even if Tim didn’t. He got as far as standing up, but something
stayed his departure—an unnatural thing, the likes of which if he’d had better manners he wouldn’t have stared at for as long as he did.

But Tim didn’t seem to mind. Worse, he didn’t seem to notice. His expression was blank, his gaze somewhere to the left of where Raylan had been seated, but not really. If he told Raylan he was looking at air particles, counting the atoms on a spec of dust, maybe Raylan would have chalked it up to Tim being purposefully weird and let it go. But Tim didn’t explain himself—couldn’t possibly. He might have looked like he was asleep, save for his listless, open-eyed gaze. The eyes in particular seemed flat, colorless and dark like the matte finish on his rifle.

“Tim. You have to talk about it. Specifically, with me.”

Tim came back to him, blinked slow and gave Raylan a doubtful look that was mostly lost to shadows and misplaced light from the television.

Raylan pressed his reasoning: “Because I’m tired of asking.”

When still Tim offered nothing, Raylan sighed, dragged a hand down his face, and returned to the couch. He didn’t get it; Tim seemed to obey everyone else’s orders. As a last-ditch effort, Raylan put an arm around Tim’s shoulders and drew him in, and felt only mild resistance to the effort.

“And because that’s what I’m here for,” Raylan added, his voice soft against Tim’s hair. “Package deal.”

"I’ll figure it out," Tim promised, while slowly leaning away from Raylan’s presence.

Raylan’s tone—and his grip—remained firm. “That’s not what I’m asking.”

“I’ll figure out… what to say to you. Later.” The snap was back in Tim’s voice. He spoke like he was toying with Raylan, playing him. Genuinely without even the faintest notion of whether to accept this as improvement, or to hone in on Tim’s apparent inability to be subtle, Raylan’s only thought was to keep ahold of Tim, to will reason into him by means of osmosis.

But Tim broke away and looked on at Raylan, that wandering gaze of his returned, its focus narrow. He studied Raylan like he was anticipating a blow.

Then, very gravely, Tim asked: “Is this because I neglected your balls?”

Raylan closed his eyes. This was why he’d asked Rachel how Tim was. There’d been an actual arbiter of truth between the two of them—the department psychiatrist. Going directly to the source, Raylan knew, wouldn’t bring him closer to any one truth, but inundate him with a slurry of would-be truths, honest misdirections, and outright lies.

He stood up, was finished being Tim’s company.

“Come to bed, don’t come to bed. I don’t care. But get your goddamn head straight. Christ Almighty.”

In the morning, Raylan awoke to find Tim sat upright, legs over his side of the bed. Raylan didn’t know if he joined sometime during the night, or merely arrived that morning and in that very position. He simply sat there five, ten minutes—Raylan watched the time creep by on the bedside alarm clock. Eventually, Raylan drew a hand from under the covers and pressed it to Tim’s naked side, indicating his presence.
Tim stood up immediately, and turned on him.

"You can stop." Tim gestured with just a hand, open, directionless and grasping at nothing.

Raylan, most of the covers gathered around his long frame, squinted at his partner. That he could be making less sense than the night before was a genuine wonder. It took Raylan a moment to compose himself, to gather that Tim didn’t object to his touch, necessarily, but its lightness.

"What, giving a shit?"

"Yes. Retain all of your shit, give none to me." Tim’s lips twisted, then relaxed. He opened his hands, closed them. It was as though Tim’s entire body was affirming his mental displacement.

"Sorry," he said. He sounded sure about it, at least. “About all that bullshit last night. But you weren’t helping.”

“Apology…” Raylan drew out the word, not confident that’s what Tim had actually handed him, “Accepted?”

Tim smiled. That faded, too, but Tim kept it on his face with sheer determination. “This is... Recreational melancholy.”

Raylan served him a blank stare. "That's what you're going with."

"I think it sounds cool, like a Victorian-era street drug."

Raylan sank back into bed, stared at the ceiling. Tim’s suddenly brighter turn was almost as confounding as the quiet dejection from earlier. Him ping-ponging all over the place--cracking jokes, telling heavy truths, spinning stories--wasn’t unusual, but he kept it dialed back. A steady, deceptively dull three, whereas last night he’d turned things up.

Raylan was glad for the quasi-apology, but he didn’t trust that Tim was entirely settled, just yet. “I’m taking Willa to the sitter. You need to get out of the apartment, exhaust yourself.”

Raylan sat up, watched Tim pull on a pair of jeans--a good development on the one hand, but on the other… Raylan had hoped the apology would be more involved. “Lest you sit around here all day, coming up with ways to exhaust me.”

“That’s fine,” Tim said, missing Raylan’s meaning. His tone was perfunctory, like they’d agreed on something. He pulled on a plain white t-shirt, then a green dress shirt, over it. Raylan thought Tim looked like he intended to return to the office, with the exception of the Deputy’s star missing from his belt. “I got some shit to do, anyway.”

“Carpe diem,” Raylan joked, his voice still thick with sleep. Tim turned to look at him again, and seemed to set upon Raylan with the same, foggy stare from earlier. Tim quickly dropped his gaze, carried it around the room as he stood in search of his jacket. It was draped over one corner of the dresser they’d repurposed as a changing table. Tim dusted baby powder off one of the sleeves before putting it on.

“I can pick her up,” he offered, keeping his voice low as he looked in on Willa, who was a blessedly heavy sleeper. “From the sitter’s. My thing should be done around two.”

“You got a thing, now?” Raylan, despite fighting valiantly to return to sleep, was sat upright in bed again. “Who are you making plans with at six in the morning?”
“Mm, look who suddenly cares about all the big, strapping company I keep. Our little conversation awaken something in you?”

Raylan rolled his eyes. “If he’s big and strapping, maybe you could introduce us. Could use something different, you know?”

Grinning, Tim took a knee on the bed, leaned in close to Raylan, and whispered, “He’d eat you alive.”

Raylan finally got that coda to Tim’s apology in the form of a slow string of kisses. With Raylan tasting like dry mouth and the inside of a pillowcase to Tim’s minty-fresh breath, the exchange was short-lived. Nonetheless, it reminded Raylan of those better moments they had together. Times when a surprisingly sweet exchange wasn’t remarked upon, after, but was merely shared.

Tim dropped into bed beside Raylan. He was fully dressed save for his boots, and Raylan didn’t expect him to lounge there for very long.

“Ramirez,” Tim said. “Former Ranger, lives in Cincinnati. Is who I’m meeting. Lunch, maybe drinks if he’s off the wagon.”

Raylan had to smile at the plain, no-frills ways in which Tim shorthanded the lives of his friends. “This is getting to sound a lot like that date you don’t want to go on.”

Tim didn’t miss a beat: “If he shows me a good time, maybe I’ll reconsider.”

Raylan smirked at Tim’s back as he left the bed. “You give him my blessing, then.”

He got a thumbs up--then the finger--before Tim disappeared from view.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The road to Louisville is littered with ex-mother-in-laws.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next week went by slowly, with Tim returning to work on reduced hours and desk duty. He did the filing--his own, first, and then anyone else’s once it came to it. He hovered over Chris from IT, wanting to marshal cyberspace. Tim even made the requisite coffee runs, all without complaint. It was his own stubbornness keeping him out of the field, as Raylan was wont to remind him with frequent visits past Tim's desk, where he dusted snow off his jacket like he expected Tim to clamor for the barest touch of the outside world.

The weekend--and Raylan’s planned rendezvous out of town--became a welcome prospect, much to Tim’s chagrin. Tim was even the one, come Thursday evening, to book the hotel.

By Saturday morning, a weak snow storm had moved on, and the sky was clear and bright.

Tim stood against his apartment building, watching Raylan walk his daughter around, letting her tug at frosted tree branches and watch the snow flutter to the ground. Tim had watched Raylan dress, then over-dress, his child for what Tim expected to amount to all of a five-minute outing. So when he followed them out of the apartment, he hadn't given much thought to his own attire.

He regretted that now, planted outside in just boots, jeans, and a sweatshirt--his grossly overpriced parka hanging uselessly in the hall closet three stories up.

He didn't return for it, however, because the act would denote his joining in, when he'd only wanted to quietly bear witness. So there he stood, fingers tinged pink by the cold, stuffed ever-deeper into his pants pockets, breathing clouds of hot air through his nostrils.

It was a cold morning. The streets were visible under a vague crisscrossing of dark streaks, and the blue sky seemed unnaturally vibrant against the couple centimeters of snow blanketing the area. It was quiet, but that was largely due to the early hour. Willa seemed to take after Tim in that respect--she'd awake with the sun, but not want for anything for some time.

Raylan set Willa down on her own two feet, intending to have her tucker herself out in the small patch of yard by Tim's apartment complex. She promptly fell forward. Willa wasn't the most accomplished at walking--yet--a characteristic Tim blamed on genetics.

"She's got her old man's swagger. It's throwing off her balance."

"You saying swagger like you don't call it hip dysplasia behind my back,” Raylan muttered, and had to crouch low and help his daughter make crunchy footprints in the bright, white earth.

"I'm just concerned," Tim drawled. "Wouldn't want to have to put you down."

"You sound about halfway sincere," Raylan said, and turned his head so that Tim could see he was
smiling. "That's got to be a personal best for you."

Then, Raylan wrenched his cell phone from his pocket and tossed it to Tim. "Make yourself useful and capture this Hallmark moment we're having here."

Tim heaved a belabored sigh.

"Is it such a chore?" Raylan asked, while scooping snow with his bare hands and patting together a ball for Willa to hold between her own—albeit tinier, mitten-encased hands.

"To get your ego in frame? Yeah, actually." Tim took care to only include Raylan, Willa, and snow-covered patch of grass in the picture. Anything beyond them served as evidence of where they were—namely, Tim’s apartment complex. He imagined Willa, grown and curious, maybe a Florida native all her life, asking after this bizarre instance of snow. What would her parents say? That she was at her father’s boyfriend’s apartment? Would Tim be an ex by that point, or would their history be erased completely, retconning him to the position of mere friend or colleague?

Tim planted a knee in the wet snow, angling to get a tighter photo. Father, pink-cheeked daughter, and snowball. Not even his own shadow on the ground encroached on the image. "There you go. Christmas card ready."

"That’s more Winona’s mother’s territory," Raylan said, remembering that he got into a wool-blend suit in the middle of goddamn July for that woman’s ridiculous Christmas card photo every year that his and Winona’s marriage lasted. Even the year they’d split, Winona’s mother wouldn’t reshoot the card, and Winona’d been awkwardly pictured alongside her then-ex-husband at Christmas time. They joked about it, later—the months she missed playing the field because it looked like they were still happily together.

Tim stood, dusted the snow from his pants, and made certain in the series of pictures he’d snapped that there was a good one. He didn’t have to go any further than the first—Willa was bright eyed, in awe of her father’s craftsmanship of the snowball. Raylan was smiling, his hat tipped back to show his easy smile. Tim didn’t think he’d ever seen Raylan happier—except for a handful of instances between the sheets of their bed.

"Fight her," Tim suggested, his tone denoting no humor. "She’s old, got weak knees."

It really was a nice picture. And Tim found himself hoping if it was seen again, Willa would spare a thought for the man who kneeled in the snow to take it.

Raylan let Willa attempt a few tentative steps of her own before they returned to Tim’s apartment to pack. After two trips, it became clear Raylan was packing all of Willa’s things, not just the overstuffed diaper bag she’d need for a night’s stay with the sitter. Tim figured Raylan meant to anticipate her every need both on the road, and in the hotel.

“And baby makes three, huh?” Tim intoned, and moved his and Raylan’s bag to the flooring, leaving room for Willa’s car seat in back. He was thrown by the unexpected addition, even a little displeased. It read clearly across his face.

He returned to the apartment to do a run-through of the place, picking up any holed-away items that belonged with Raylan’s child, not in Tim’s home. He came away with two beloved stuffed animals and a baby thermometer.

“Way to ruin the surprise, by the way.” Tim said, brandishing the stuffed toys. “Now I know where we’re going. Petting zoo.”
“Only if you’re good,” Raylan said, smirking. He decided to put Tim out of his misery and come clean with an explanation: “She’s just along for the ride. Winona’s mother wants to have her a while.”

Tim hummed his acknowledgement. He’d wait until such a promise came to pass.

He started searching through Willa’s bags for a place to join the thermometer with similar goods. It was large, a substantial piece of technology with attachments and a power cord. It wouldn’t do for Willa’s grandmother to spy such a curious device out of place.

"Where do you want this?" Tim asked, frustrated that his search seemed to turn up only baby clothes and wet wipes.

Raylan grinned. "Aw, I got that for you."

Tim stuffed the thermometer in with the wipes.

After securing Willa in her car seat, Raylan put on her winter hat. It was a gift from Rachel, with the stitching on both sides resembling a little cowboy hat.

Tim surveyed the scene. There was no learning how to do such a thing. That Raylan merely anticipated the colder weather in Louisville and acted accordingly did not do the gesture justice. It was simply kind and, above all else, fatherly. Neither attributes were exercised by Arlo, yet Raylan had them in spades with respect to his own child.

“I don’t think I can be a part of this,” Tim said. He was downright disturbed by how adorable the image was. With her wisps of brown hair and dark eyes, Willa looked so much like her daddy, and yet so sweet and innocent.

“Get your ass in the car,” Raylan instructed. He’d come to master a bizarre tone deemed baby-appropriate: he didn’t speak too loudly or too biting, but the tone rarely reflected the sentiment.

“People are gonna think we kidnapped her," Tim pressed.

“You’d think that?” Raylan asked, leaning against the open driver’s side of his Lincoln. “Seeing two men with a kid?”

Tim made an annoyed face. “Don’t say it like that, like she’s ours. She ain’t a pizza.”

“You don’t want kids,” Raylan reasoned, perhaps for the first time. He supposed he’d never actually asked about Willa staying with them for a few weeks at a time while Winona was job hunting or vacationing with friends. Raylan did not treat it as an option--here was a chance to spend time with his daughter, of course she was welcome where Raylan lived. Because Tim did not serve them both an eviction notice, Raylan figured he’d given his ringing endorsement.

“I guess all my efforts otherwise have been a touch misleading,” Tim allowed. Then, because Willa could at least hear him, if not understand him, he added: “Not of my own, no."

Raylan took that for an odd answer. He grinned, teased, "You want someone else's?"

Tim leaned his head back, pretending to consider it. "Well, Willa doesn't give me any lip."

"She just ain't talking, yet. You wait."

"She better hurry," Tim said. He caught the curious look Raylan tried to shoot elsewhere, and
amended coolly, “Louisville ain’t so far of a drive.”

Tim was wary around the child, not prone to touch her unless invited or the only option. She was special, a presence in Raylan’s life he’d very nearly discounted when things didn’t seem to work with Winona. Even before taking her first breath, Willa had been the beneficiary of a great and terrible deed on her father’s behalf, because there wasn’t a force in the universe--moral or lawful or otherwise--that would see him let her down.

There were only so many people in the world privy to that reality, Tim being one of them. He knew, likewise, that Raylan took pride in caring for his child in all means available to him--and during the odd span of her visits to Kentucky, that meant the two were largely inseparable. For Tim, the fact that Raylan was giving up some time with her to be with him did not escape his notice.

"I'm banking on her falling asleep," Raylan said, which Tim had learned--the hard way--meant we have to be quiet.

Tim sighed. For show, he thumbed open a solo game of Scrabble on his phone. "Well, I was gonna blow you through every toll, but I guess not."

Raylan's eyebrows shot up. Tim didn't usually say shit like that unless he was of a mind to commit. "No, you can still do that. I insist, as a matter of fact."

"It'll be one of those things though," Tim threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating Willa, and added, "That kids remember and repress? Daddy being sucked off on the Interstate. It will haunt her."

"You calling me Daddy," Raylan said, "Is something that’ll haunt me."

Tim directed his wry smile down at his phone. "Therapy for everyone, then."

The drive was slow due to the weather and Raylan's abundance of caution. There was nary a snowflake stuck to the pavement once they reached the highway, but Raylan drove like the entire state was under a heavy layer of ice. Tim sort of felt it, strangely, isolated to the car. The radio was silent, Willa was asleep, and Raylan wasn't about to interrupt that peace by speaking to Tim.

Tim found that was just as well. There were some things he needed to mull over, give thought to before he breathed air into them and made an audience of Raylan. There must have been a flash of his hardened face in the reflection of the ice-kissed car window, because Raylan soon took notice. Wordlessly, he slipped his right hand into Tim's left, and rubbed circles with his thumb along Tim's knuckles. They were cracked slightly due to the cold, and red, the mark of any good southern boy.

Raylan gave Tim a gentle squeeze, which Tim returned.

"You should suck my dick," Raylan said maybe half an hour into the drive, and three minutes into handholding, when the thought had really settled with him. "Could be therapeutic."

"Does it wear you out?" Tim asked, his tone flat, "Caring so much?"

Raylan smirked, then brought Tim's hand in for a kiss. It was only the barest brush of his lips to Tim's knuckles, and Tim felt more of Raylan's facial hair than anything else. But it was sweet, if a little absurd and beyond the both of them to take seriously.

"Aw," Tim said, then wrenched his hand away.
Raylan's tender mood did not hold any longer than the remainder of the drive. Willa woke up and was fussy, which led to a detour to a stripmall in search of a clean restroom with a changing table. It was all for naught; Willa's diaper was bone dry. She only wanted some attention.

Seemingly to the contrary, what Raylan took away from his child's incessant wailing and the fool's errand to calm her was this: he didn't want to see his daughter away into the arms of her grandmother just yet. Tim felt this was an obvious--and long-coming--turn, which led him to follow Raylan around the mall at a distance. By the time they were back on the road and deep into Louisville, Tim was done following Raylan around.

"You can't wait in the car."

"So I'll wait on the porch instead?" Tim looked unimpressed.

"You come inside, Tim," Raylan sighed, and made the request the spitting image of a command.

Tim cocked his head left, then right, imagining his presumption to go down about as smoothly as a night's sleep on a bed of nails. "She does not want me inside."

"You waiting out here is worse." Raylan adjusted Willa--now awake and wriggling excitedly--and turned, then started down the driveway on foot. Over his shoulder, he threw a taunt: "It's like that Daddy thing all over again."

Tim was out of the car in a hot second. "Jesus Christ. I'm coming." He made himself useful by carrying Willa’s diaper bag, which Raylan had thoughtfully left for him in the trunk. He wrestled the car seat out, too, and rightly figured that was just Raylan forgetting things for the hell of it. He jogged to join Raylan at the house so as to void lagging behind, looking about as thrilled as he felt to be facing Winona's mother again.

The house was a grand thing, but the bare trees crowding its sides, as well as the fake potted plants by the front door, gave it a spooky air of a graveyard.

The woman in question--Barbara was her name, and Tim, unlike Raylan, had not earned the right to call her Barb--greeted her granddaughter at the door with an adoring smile. Her expression fell, then cinched, like it was held together through an elaborate pulley system. She regarded the two men sharply, then hurried them both inside.

She peppered them with the usual--questions about the drive and Raylan's work, all the while ignoring every answer. She wore a sharp skirt and a soft, candy-colored sweater. Raylan always thought she dressed like a politician's wife--aspirationally, that is.

In exchange for Willa, Barbara pressed glasses of iced tea into Tim and Raylan's hands. To a fault, and no matter the inclement weather, she was the epitome of Southern hospitality: an attentive host. At the very least, that is what she felt like when forced to spend even a minute of her time with her daughter’s ex-husband and his current boyfriend. She hosted a myriad of ill will.

Tim regarded his drink, suspect. "Is there spit in mine?"

Barbara frowned, not quite hearing him. Unlike most of her friends, Barbara was too proud to even consider getting hearing aids. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing. I like... spit." Tim mumbled the last bit into the glass itself, where it found an audience only in Raylan, who was coming to regret whatever misguided sense of camaraderie that led him to believe Tim could be trusted with a responsibility as great as not making as asshole out of himself, for one goddamn minute.
But Raylan knew that was not the truth--the first time, a family get-together in this very home, Tim was on his best behavior. He was polite and uttered not a syllable out of turn. The pressed shirt and slacks did not go unnoticed, neither. But he'd received a cold reception and through the attention he did get, was actively made to feel foolish and excessive. An extra chair drawn to the dinner table, unmatched, even different flatware--Barbara had really pulled out all the stops.

The same patience followed him to their second meeting, and their third, and beyond that Raylan couldn't fault Tim for at least using the time to amuse himself.

Raylan noticed a red For Sale sign on the kitchen table. He wandered closer and found a sheet of paper listing dates for upcoming open house viewings.

“You’re moving?” Raylan asked.

“Oh, yes,” Barbara said, her thin lips stretching across her blindingly white veneers. Willa's tiny hand reached up near her face, as if to make a grab for them. “Florida, we’re thinking. Someplace warm.”

Tim piped up with the helpful suggestion, “Satan’s taint?”

“Excuse me?”

“San Tantain,” Tim said, a little louder. He continued to bullshit, saying: “Little neighborhood outside of Miami. I got an Aunt who lives there. Latin area, but without the Latinos, you know?”

“Oh,” Barbara said, and was torn between asking after such a place--truly, the ideal--or her old standby: criticism and general beratement. “You mumble. Did your parents ever tell you that?”

“Both my parents had profound speech impediments,” Tim told her, his eyes open wide as if to further convey this false truth. Beside him, Raylan had to duck his head slightly to keep his shit-eating grin hidden. “I didn’t learn proper English ‘til I was fourteen.”

"I see," Barbara said, her back turned to Tim as she ventured from the parlor to the living area.

"It really is a lifetime effort," Tim continued, getting in the dig before she could.

"What is it you're called, again?" Barbara asked, then set Willa down in an ornate crib she'd brought into the living room. It was no surprise that for as much as she bemoaned the absence of her grandchild, Barbara wouldn't dote on her for long. It was why Raylan had a little something extra for the housekeeper, Clara, burning a hole in his pocket.

"Tim," Raylan supplied before Tim could so much as open his mouth.

"Uncle Tim, if you'd prefer." Tim drawled, just to be spiteful. Barbara physically shuddered.

Raylan bent down over the crib and cupped Willa's head with his hand as she stood, eager to remain a part of their happy trio. "Willa throws in a dada for him, every now and again."

Even Tim stilled at that. He'd not mentioned it--the few times Willa would get fussy at night and Tim, the perpetually light sleeper, would be first to see to her. She'd gurgle and let rip a string of das. Tim, of all things, would promptly correct her. He didn't think Raylan knew about it--he certainly hadn't been on the receiving end of merciless teasing, which was the only indicator Tim counted on.

Barbara smoothed her bony hands down the sides of her skirt and then laced her fingers in front, a
strangely discomforting show of force.

“It would seem she’s already developed quite the sense of humor.” She snapped out each word, her jaw wired like a trap.

Raylan smiled warmly and drew his child into his arms for a parting hug. “Yeah, you add that to the brown fingers bit she’s got… it’s a hell of a routine.”

Tim found himself unexpectedly warmed by the comment. Raylan had a way about him, sometimes, a constant air of confidence that he extended to those in his closest company. And here he used it to crush Barbara’s messy slight without drawing Tim back into the fray.

“Next time,” Barbara spoke haltingly. “I would appreciate you called ahead, and perhaps we could meet someplace less... conspicuous.”

“Less conspicuous,” Raylan repeated, and turned to Tim for confirmation. “Like an alleyway?”

“How about some bushes?” Tim suggested.

“Maybe a public restroom?”

“The neighbors,” Barbara implored--her anxiety genuine, if grossly misinformed. “They'll talk.”

Raylan huffed a short laugh, the kind Tim had heard before. It was the last of Raylan's patience, pressed between his lips, then lost forever. He had something brewing, some sharp word to cut her off at her knees, hosiery and all. He leaned back like he had to reach for it, and started, “Barb--”

“No.” She was faster on the draw than Raylan, suddenly. A mean look in her eye told them both that she simply wanted it more.

"Maybe my daughter is fine with all this--" Barbara nodded sharply at Tim, who spiritedly mouthed in mock-surprise, and with a large hand splayed over his chest as if to calm his startled heart, “All this?” , before ceding the floor to the remainder of her tired diatribe.

“--But I have the luxury of experience to know what is best for a child. Maybe you can appreciate protecting my granddaughter from uncertainty, from the doubt that she was born of anything less than the longstanding love between two people. I know it's what Winona wants--that's the way her father and I raised her." She smoothed her hands down the sides of her skirt again, and finished: "There was a time you might have appreciated that."

It went without saying that the reason Barbara's wealthy husband wasn't presently at home was due to his prior engagement with one of the two women he was seeing on the side, each half the age of the other--little Russian nesting dolls of adultery. Be that as it may, Raylan couldn't deny Barbara had struck a nerve with him, however accidentally.

Winona was an old love, Tim a kind of... First love, in some respects.

“Alright, Barb," he smiled, as if her commentary hadn't just thrown him off his game a crucial step. "You got my number--we’ll be in town for a spell, so call if she needs anything."

When it looked as though Barbara was ready to bounce back for round two, Raylan said to her, his tone light but his hand raised flat, like he meant to physically lower her ire to the floor and then through it, “I'm bringing her to you two days early out of the goodness of my heart. Tim and I love having her."
It was strange, but leaving the grand house with a newfound shame—that his presence had an impact, however negative—was the most Tim had ever felt he and Raylan were in a relationship.

Tim stalled in the driveway. He knew Barbara was watching them through the parlour window, like she expected her reasoning was so sound that Raylan would part ways with Tim then and there. “It's weird how it's still never really you she shits on. You play a pretty active role in our gratuitous display of depravity, here. Should I clarify for her you're doing the majority of the fucking? I'll tell her.”

"Don't fucking listen to her," Raylan said sharply. He didn’t turn around, and Tim was fairly certain Raylan was speaking to himself.

They drove for a time, with Tim trusting that Raylan knew the city well enough, even though they took a few too many left turns and detours into the country when the city was so close.

"You know, you can defend yourself," Raylan said, sort of pointedly, like he'd been dwelling on the thought too long. "Making me do it just gets back to Winona as me bein' combative."

Tim shook his head. "I agree with her."

Before Tim had to run the gamut from fast excuses to realizations of internalized homophobia—Raylan's favorite new excuse for Tim not wanting to do random shit—he specified, "It's fucking weird. You got a kid with your ex-wife. She's off with eight of her girlfriends in Maui, and you're playing house with some unsavory type—a boyfriend, not even a mistress like a respectable man'd do."

Tim took care to at least couch his comments in good humor, and earned a smile from Raylan for his troubles.

Perhaps a touch less jocular, Rylan suggested, "Well tell her that, then, and you two will get along like gangbusters."

"Nah," Tim said, deciding not to throw Barbara that particularly succulent bone. It was far more rewarding, he found, to prey on her fear of the two of them being some kind of happy couple.

Raylan delivered a final taunt: "You know what she calls you?"

Tim parted his lips with a slight smack. "I can only guess."

"The Ex's future ex."

"And she's funny, too." Tim grinned. A sidelong glance at Raylan confirmed his suspicions—Raylan was still sore after the ordeal. Tim didn't know why he expected any different; Raylan was cool in a fight, but his grudges burned hot.

"That bother you?" Tim asked, initially quite curious. Rather than wait for an answer, though—and quite possibly, hearing something he'd rather not—Tim reasoned lightly: "I been called worse. Hell, someone once called me Marshall Givens' Sidekick."

“Shit.”

“No kidding. He’s dead now."

Raylan believed it.
“It bothers me,” Raylan admitted. “It don’t bother you?”

“I don’t think she’s wrong.” Tim said slowly, thinking he was being careful. Despite his efforts, the answer dropped like a bomb in Raylan’s town car. Raylan did that thing where he got real quiet, then spoke only a loud, overly-pronounced, "Huh."

Tim eyed the road, watched Raylan miss another turnoff into the city. “Come on, don’t act like you’re surprised.” Tim felt it was obvious enough for him, and remained staunchly convinced Raylan knew the shelf life of their relationship was limited, even if he didn't like to say so. Fatality was a thing Raylan imagined for other people, never himself.

“Thinking like that, though,” Raylan’s stare turned hard, got lost far away. “Why do we even bother?”

“I always thought it was the stimulating conversation,” Tim joked. Instantly, he knew Raylan needed more than that. Contrary to what Tim had long believed, it wasn't so much Raylan's ego that was fragile, but his heart. But getting a soft, flirtatious word from Tim was damn near impossible; he was, as evidenced, more the offer a string of roadside blowjobs type. He gave it his best shot, saying, "And to borrow from Rachel, you're easy on the eyes."

"Should have gone after her," Raylan lamented. His eyes narrowed some, giving the impression of a smile.

"You had your pick of the litter," Tim reminded him, a little disgusted at his and Rachel's collective interest, a little impressed by Raylan's ability to draw it out of them. Admittedly, Rachel would deny anything beyond a mere aesthetic allure.

It started to snow. Tim could hardly see it ahead of the street, but tiny flakes gathered in delicate clusters along the windshield wipers. He was glad to have his parka draped over the back seat. Raylan’s wool trench was there, too, layered underneath.

"You think I should get back together with Winona?" Raylan asked, an accusation despite the carefully crafted tone of nonchalance.

In an equally sweetened voice, Tim allowed: "I think a partnership ain't unheard of."

His phone buzzed at his side, and Tim discovered a text from Winona, which usually meant Raylan had one of bearing the same sentiment, but had failed to reply. Tim continued to talk as he typed a response. "Granted, you fucking with me will set you back. But she sees you being a dutiful father, and... Shit. I don't know. Instincts or something."

"You want to say hormones."

"It's sexist if I say hormones."

Raylan smiled at that and drawled, "Good to know we have your vote of confidence."

Tim decided not to deliver the kicker--that Winona was hardly some far-removed presence, a tangent only available through interaction with their daughter, and that if Raylan required proof then he only needed to check his phone, inspect the message from his ex.

Instead, Tim leaned over and patted Raylan's knee, asked, "Is this date everything you'd hoped it'd be?"

“And more,” Raylan grinned, knowing now that Tim was surely fucking with him just a little bit.
He liked that.

The quiet in the car--Raylan still hadn’t turned on the radio--stirred up an unease in Tim, who instinctively glanced back where Willa had been. He had to rifle through the front pocket of his and Raylan’s shared duffle for a pack of gum, then, to cover his tracks.

“Is it that nicotine shit?” Raylan asked, although Tim had not offered him any. “Don’t know why you chew that. You never even smoked.”

“I like the taste,” Tim bullshitted, then handed Raylan the pack. “It’s green, so stop your whining.”

“Green?” Raylan asked, incredulous.

“Green. Like, mint.” Tim bit his lip, then. Of course Raylan was playing him. “Christ. You know, I suck your dick, I pack gum. Why you gotta sass me?”

“First of all, you did not suck my dick. Today.” Finally, Raylan took a turn into more familiar territory. The Louisville outside the car windows was the Louisville Tim liked best: the turn-off from a string of Victorian-style homes onto a spread of bars and hole-in-the-wall pizza places, used book- and record stores stacked tight into renovated two-story apartments.

When they passed warring Scottish and Irish pubs on either side of the narrow street, Tim lolled his head hopefully towards Raylan. He pressed his lips into a pout Raylan had once termed downright indecent.

“Is it too early to start drinkin’?”

“How about we break in that hotel room.”

They damn near didn’t make it to the room. Raylan was tenting, his hands all over Tim since they crossed through the lobby and into the elevators. Tim was half-sure his fly was open, and if their shared duffle hadn’t been drawn across his shoulders, it would have surely been forgotten somewhere between the third and sixth floors. It came off quick once they entered the room, and Tim started undressing.

Raylan dug through the bag in search of lube, condoms. If he knew Tim, they’d be hidden somewhere near the bottom of the bag, simply because Tim had collected their necessities and packed their most pertinent items, first. His mind was on this singular task--and out of the corner of his eye he could see more of Tim than he had in a good, long while--but he came across something in the duffle he simply could not overlook.

“Christ, you brought a book?”

“I’m holding to my suspicion that you’re here with an ulterior motive.” Tim’s voice went from clear to muffled as he pulled off his sweater and shirt in one go.

Finally, Raylan found what he was looking for. He gave Tim a sharp smile as he tossed the items on the bed, then his own shirt in the other direction. “I was. And we’ve seen the last of the old bag.”

Raylan didn’t take the book as a slight--even on this excursion out of town, Tim would still rise at an unspeakably early hour. The book, Raylan had learned on several occasions, was a means of keeping his mind busy, himself quiet for his partner. But that wasn’t the case just yet.
They went for hours, until the afternoon was lost and a good meal was fast becoming a necessity. The bullshit with Willa’s grandmother, the shooting, Tim’s whole shitty week—it all faded into the background as they drew into the warmth unfolding between their bodies, and became focused on nothing but one another. Tim got reacquainted with Raylan's long limbs, and Raylan was shocked for the hundredth time that Tim's eyes were damn pretty.

Without Willa to be mindful of, Raylan got loud. Tim swore a blue streak, egging him on.

When they’d finished a second time, Raylan dropped onto his belly, his legs feeling tight and tired. He rolled to his right, threw out an arm and drew Tim in against his side. Tim was already on his back, the palms of his hands fit into his eyes, reddened elbows in the air. He stretched, then, as far back as he could until he got ahold of the headboard. His muscles ached from keeping that very position—earlier, the first time—but now it felt like a welcome release to be touching the smooth wood again, still warm under his grip.

“Am I right in thinking we haven’t done it like that in a while?”

Raylan didn’t know if Tim meant fucking him so thoroughly, or doing it twice.

“I ain’t being modest when I say, I don’t think it’s ever been done quite like that.”

“Oh, well. Congratulations to us.”

Tim extended a hand over their pressed, naked bodies, for Raylan to shake. He did, and laughed.

They rested a while longer, neither wanting anything more than the comfort of the razed bedsheets. Raylan threaded a hand through the hair on Tim’s chest. It was a soft spread, enough length in places that Raylan could get a good hold between his fingers, if he wanted. If Tim wanted.

For now, he settled for just a touch.

“You ever think about shaving your chest again?”

“No,” Tim answered promptly, remembering the itchy couple of weeks between the much-lauded touchably smooth era, and the current epitome of the evolutionary scale: shed dog hair. He glanced up and over at Raylan, suspicious. “Is that a request?”

Raylan closed his eyes and smiled. “What if it was?”

Tim groaned, and Raylan smiled wider. He’d already won this argument, just by asking.

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At the rib joint, they ate in paced silence, only glancing up to share the odd smirk, or sauce-streaked smile of satisfaction. They had to gather their strength.

Tim found himself stuffing half a roll into his mouth to keep from smiling full-toothed and brilliant. He wished he wasn’t so happy over this—a simple meal with Raylan, like they’d shared countless times before because neither of them could cook much beyond pasta and potatoes. Tim supposed he was just a little enamoured with the fact that Raylan had kept his word, had promised him ribs and here they were, smeared across his mouth and coloring his fingertips.

“What’s that?” Raylan asked, drawing a thumb across his lips and nodding at Tim.

“Mm?”
“What’s that smile?”

Tim frowned, played dumb. “What’s a smile?”

Of course, there was no surer way to reveal himself to Raylan.

“It’s that thing you do when I get your cock between my--yeah, that’s it! Aw, and it’s a nice one, too.”

Raylan got ice cream, after, and offered Tim the ceremonial first lick. Tradition held, and Tim abstained. The bar they had eyes on was some ways away, but they decided to chance the cold and make the walk. There were scarce others on their path, and the sidewalks were dusted with more snow than footprints.

Tim hunched his shoulders and dug his hands deep into the pockets of his parka, searching fruitlessly for the heat he’d found in bed with Raylan. Despite his healthy appetite, Raylan didn’t have a lick of fat to his frame. His flat stomach seemed to betray the universe’s every physical truth--or, at the very least, all those pertaining to ice cream. Still, even with a body like his disposition, Raylan radiated warmth all the same.

Tim glanced at Raylan, who suddenly seemed to drop out of range. He slowed to a stop, turned his body smoothly away from Tim, and engaged a bystander pitted in the enclave of a building.

The subject of Raylan’s interest was a dark-haired, dark-eyed man in snug jeans and a rich-looking, camel-colored coat that was designed more for style than substance. He was smoking a cigarette--or had been. Now, he seemed wholly occupied with smiling wide and bright for Raylan.

“This place any good?” Raylan asked, not even bothering to look up or around, confirm for himself that this man had just stepped out of a bar.

The man nodded. “Good selection, yeah.”

“Let’s go here,” Raylan said--slow, like he’d given it real thought. Tim could only assume Raylan was talking to him; he raised his voice, but his attention remained firmly tied to this new man, this stranger.

“Thought you wanted to hear that band,” Tim pressed, which was a lie. He wanted to hear the band, some folk duo who had enveloped a punk drummer into their scheme. They butchered their share of Bob Dylan songs, but Tim kind of loved it. Raylan had only nodded, smiled amusedly when Tim suggested seeking them out, catching their set.

“Just one drink here,” Raylan said, still eyeballing the man in the doorway. “See the selection.”

They brushed shoulders when the man held open the door and let Raylan in. Tim stalled a moment, sized the man up himself.

“Looks pretty basic to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Thoughts? This was the calm before the storm. In the next chapter, Tim and Raylan do
some bar hopping and Tim unloads a weighty truth.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The long goodbye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The bar was loud and not Raylan’s scene, even with a handsome stranger eyeballing the inseam of his Levi’s. Raylan flirted with the man a short while longer, chatted him up. He was a bartender, as it turned out, and knew more than your run-of-the-mill bar fly about the selection. Tim listened while Raylan nodded along, and thought any drunk worth his weakened liver and lost dignity could do a better job selling a sip of something off the beaten path.

But that wasn't what this fella was selling, clearly.

Tim thought, too, that he looked comically like Boyd Crowder--maybe if Boyd were cast in a movie. Better looking, with only the scrapings of familiarity--shining dark eyes, an expensive smile. He didn’t have quite the vocabulary, but “on the house” were the only words anyone needed to know to get on Raylan Givens’ good side.

Tim ordered a beer from the other bartender working--the one who had a handle on his smoking habit such that he didn’t abandon his post during a rush--and tried to lighten up. If it was this obvious to him, Raylan would soon come around. His eyes would adjust to the light and he’d see what he was doing.

Around the time a remixed, techno version of the theme song from Jurassic Park started to play, Raylan seemed to catch on. He downed his bourbon and excused himself to the restroom.

The bartender who’d so easily caught Raylan’s eye leaned over the bar and said to Tim, “He’s cute, right?”

“I’m here with him,” Tim said. The bartender mouthed what? and indicated he couldn’t hear. Tim spoke a little louder, dropped his drawl in favor of a firm word: “He’s here with me.”

“Oh,” the bartender seemed genuinely surprised. He’d assumed nothing more than Tim as the hapless friend, just a follower in the long shadow of the more adventurous, Stetson-wearing Raylan. He wasn't entirely wrong; the most adventurous Tim got with a hat was backwards.

The bartender tried to explain himself: “I thought you were just a good friend to, uh, indulge him.”

Tim made quick work of his beer. Having this conversation made it easy. “He requires a lot of indulging, yes.”

When Raylan returned from bathroom, his eyes were set on his phone, checking the time. Then, like he wasn’t the one to cause the detour in the first place, Raylan dropped a hand onto Tim’s shoulder and asked close to his ear, "How 'bout that band?"
The bar's two main walls were bare cement, with only some scribbles and pock holes for decoration. Tim knew they were only the result of air pockets in the material, but he couldn't help but be reminded of ricocheting gunfire along narrow streets, the remnants of unsteady enemy hands on an AK-47.

For this very reason, Tim pointed it out to Raylan, who didn’t catch his meaning. Raylan wasn’t even in the same ballpark.

“I think the kids call it aesthetic.”

Tim chose not to explain himself—he would rather Raylan take him for a simpleton. At any rate, the walls made for a warmed-over atmosphere. Stale air was only relieved by the odd, fresh breath gained by the main door swinging open to new patrons. Tim and Raylan shed their coats by the time they reached the bar, which was situated along along the shortest wall. The bartenders seemed pinned behind the grand, glassy-black table. With Raylan in their midst, Tim thought this must be for their own protection.

Drinks in hand, Raylan tucked into a booth near the small stage where sound equipment stood in two short stacks. Raylan then grabbed Tim’s arm, welcoming him into the tight space. There was an empty chair on the other side of the small, sticky-stained table, onto which Raylan deposited their coats.

“Better view,” Raylan reasoned, then gestured to his own face. “Well,” he added, like the contradiction was obvious.

They settled in and Tim expected an arm to cross his shoulders, but it never dropped into place. At Tim’s apartment, on the couch and in the exhausting ninth inning of a televised baseball game, Raylan could be counted on for that lazy extra weight. Tim just didn’t have the reach.

Besides, Raylan was good for those kinds of things.

Tim went for the less nuanced equivalent: he put a hand high on Raylan’s leg where it was hid under the table. His long fingers traced the inseam of Raylan’s jeans, squeezed his slim thigh. The grip was met with Raylan’s own, and Tim felt both the icy kiss of Raylan’s ring and the rough warmth of his open hand.

The whole thing carried on in the dark, out of view. Tim told himself otherwise--that he got away with this brazen act because he’d demanded it.

He didn’t know for sure. With Raylan, he hardly ever knew.

Most of the time, that was fine. The only place he felt truly at ease with Raylan was the time they spent together on the job, where they got close, but never physical. The hours they poured in contributed to a wealth of time where it was easiest to communicate because they had only two options: lengthy conversations in an effort to entertain one another and stave off boredom, or the wordless understanding they developed for a tense moment. Guns blazing, there was little time for anything more than a glancing look, the barest nod.

The physical aspect of their relationship had less time to develop--not that they didn't put everything into practice sessions. For as much as Tim felt good making Raylan feel good, and sought to share in something unabashedly nice, he liked much more to get on Raylan's nerves and pay for it later. These sweet things--playful touches, the odd, unexpected kiss--Raylan was used to them, having been with women. Or so was Tim's interpretation, his stunted excuse for doing the same despite genuinely liking those exchanges, himself.
Tim made several conscious choices about how he behaved with Raylan, much in the effort to keep him interested enough to stay around. Raylan, of course, was what he was. Perfect, in Raylan's own opinion, or as good as. And Tim only had minor complaints. Tim wanted strong and firm and a mental acrobat. Raylan was all those things in spades. It was only the blind spot the size of Harlan that Tim found he had to contend with--the part of Raylan that saw his journey as a straight, hard line. And all those he came across didn't run parallel to him so much as... were swift detours.

Raylan, to his credit, liked a challenge.

The band got up to begin their set, and Tim removed his hand from Raylan's thigh to politely clap along with the rest of the audience. Raylan dropped his hand to Tim's leg, then, in return. His gesture was interrupted by the presence of Tim's phone in his jeans pocket. Raylan, never one to merely accept defeat, slipped his hand into Tim's pocket to remove the phone, clear a path. It was a more aggressive play that even Tim's, and it got Tim riled enough that his attention was severed from the band so that he could watch Raylan's little stunt, instead.

The entire exchange was more silly than invasive, and was born of the stupid kind of excitement that came with being somewhere, with someone. That he was readily into that kind of flirtatious thing had surprised Tim, at first. He liked fucking and getting off, and had envisioned a lifetime of doing just that, until his knees gave out. But the relationship angle, which Tim sought to separate from anything physical, barreled its way in--often at Raylan’s behest. Doing something together because it was inherently more fun that way was his always his selling point. As a philosophy, it had mixed results.

Raylan leaned in towards Tim about ten minutes into the set, during what Tim informed him was a boss ass shakuhachi solo.

“They’re good, right?”

“Saying so in question form really cements your opinion.”

“They’re not to my tastes,” Raylan allowed. He took a gulp of bourbon, got comfortable.

“No,” Tim said, his tone light as he pointed towards a corner the stage, ”In the right light the one on the left looks like that bartender.” He caught Raylan rolling his eyes as he adjusted his hat. “He really took a shine to you.”

“And I, to his free bourbon.” Raylan’s cool response rebuffed Tim’s insinuation, but the band was taking a break and Raylan wasn’t about to get out of this conversation unscathed.

"Asked me if I thought you were cute."

"I hope that earned an easy answer."

"You have no shame,” Tim grinned.

“I could have got you a taste,” Raylan said. “You were too busy looking like someone pissed in your cornflakes.”

“So you do recall me being there?” Tim didn't bother hiding his contempt. They'd traveled this road a number of times, and arrived at the same dead-ended truth: Raylan's antics were cute, until they weren't. Tim's patience was endless, until it wasn't. "Captive audience to your little show?"

Raylan's hand had disappeared from Tim's thigh at some point during the set. He returned it, now, to give Tim a condescendingly reassuring pat.
“Oh, Timothy,” Raylan drawled, his tone deceptively sweet, “Delicate as a rose, as always.”

There were a myriad of things Tim had a mind to spit back. Things like, stunts like the one Raylan pulled are only fun when they were in on it together. To be the abandoned party, the jilted company, the cool straight friend spelled little more than assured embarrassment. Instead, Tim said: "You know that ain't my name, right?"

Stalled by whatever joke Tim was trying to make sailing clear over his head, Raylan considered the comment as it was, Tim's intentions notwithstanding. "Don't that make sex a little awkward for you?"

"Timothy," Tim repeated, a sly smirk crossing his face, "Ain't my name."

Raylan cupped a hand around Tim’s pint, drew it steadily away from him. It left a lone trail of beaded condensation in its wake. Tim craned a hand out over it and plucked it back, took a long swig, and then set down the glass, triumphant. "Raylan Givens, do you think Kentucky has a monopoly on the drunken redneck demographic? We do alright in Arkansas." He had Raylan’s full attention, now. Or more precisely, his curiosity—which was as good as. Tim almost hated to give up the game. "My birth certificate just says Tim."

Raylan was holding back a laugh, but Tim wanted to hear it. He continued, "I'm lucky my old man didn't make more of an effort. I could be Timo."

"And you never thought to tell me this?" Raylan asked, sort of paced, like he genuinely believed Tim would correct himself. It seemed like the kind of thing they'd be bored enough to start into during a stakeout. Raylan was certain that, if nothing else, Tim had at least asked after the Podunk origins of Raylan's name. Which holler creek his daddy done fished it out of--that whole spiel.

Tim figured if the punchline sounded practiced, it's because it was. "It's second-string first date fare," he said. Somehow, he and Raylan never crossed that particular threshold.

Raylan was smiling now, full tilt. "Surely at least one of our prisoner transports could have met such a prestigious standard?"

Tim shrugged, still playful despite the coolness of the gesture. "I ain't gonna lie, a few came close."

Raylan liked what a few drinks did to Tim’s voice. Softened it, spun the syllables around in circles. Alcohol turned up the corners of Tim’s mouth just a hair, got it to that sweet, barely-there smile Raylan thought Tim should adopt as his own.

Raylan thought he said something to that effect, once--in bed, still drinking. It had to have been months ago.

“You think I should smile all the time,” Tim had said, slow, like he was trying to see the reason in an inherently unreasonable statement. He was on his stomach, bare ass worked over--Raylan remembered that, too. "Even when I shoot people? That'd give the wrong message, don't you think?"

“All I’m saying is, it looks good on you.”

“I’m smiling now. Can you tell?”

And here Tim was smiling again, beer in hand. When he threw back the rest, Raylan nudged his own empty glass towards him. Tim took the hint.
“A double,” Raylan specified. Because it looked like the band was readying for another set.

It wasn’t a tedious errand, running drinks. A moment to travel the length of the bar, a few minutes to await service. He started back not five minutes later only to find a woman tucked in cosily with Raylan.

Tim was not surprised. It was a funny thing--Raylan didn’t fool around with women anymore, not since they’d settled, moved in together. As far as Tim figured, another woman was the linchpin, the very crux of Raylan’s definition of betrayal. Tim imagined that was the kind of thing a married man learned, and didn’t doubt Winona had been a fine teacher. But Raylan was so at ease with a woman’s company that it was the kind of thing Tim could picture him doing, all the time. Now was no exception, and something about Raylan pulling this stunt again so quickly after the last, coupled with the bright smile shining out from under the shade of his hat made Tim stall in his return.

More often than not, Tim gave Raylan the benefit of the doubt. In shootings--always. In these such instances--well. He was a handsome man, momentarily sat all by his lonesome. That was as good an invitation as anything. Almost readily, Tim accepted that the woman had done all the coming-on, here. Raylan only did the rest--the smiling, the making room, the well-crafted and oft-used explanation of the hat.

Tim didn’t think the first effort had any place on their date, and maybe the second was enough to end it.

He decided he didn’t want to watch, at the very least. However far Raylan got, or if he even made mention of the woman towards the end of their night, Tim didn’t want to have his own objective truth to stack up against Raylan’s estimation. He returned to the bar, found a single seat positioned towards the re-assembling band, and made himself comfortable--his vantage point of Raylan, all the while, was kept purposefully obscured. Tim drank Raylan’s bourbon in one smooth gulp, and followed it up with a few more--courtesy of Raylan, of course.

Tim wondered if, because Raylan never had a clue what he was paying for, if Tim wasn’t stealing? Tim dropped that line of thought quick, not being much for philosophizing while drunk. He loosened up, but didn’t spiral outwards. He drank just enough to see himself a little clearer--not a sight he’d often like to confront, otherwise.

On his next, slower sampling of Jim Beam, something clicked. He struck certainty like he’d been mining for it, blasting away at the bedrock until it spilled out before him. Raylan had done this before, he’d do it again. Tim envied that kind of consistency, and imagined for himself what he’d do with such a gift.

He was so certain, it near about spoiled the drunken haze he was working on. What officially did the spoiling was Raylan, up out of his seat, and spotting Tim easily.

"So this is where you’ve been hiding," Raylan said, and if he sounded pressed, Tim figured it was only on account of how long he’d been waiting for his drink.

Raylan leaned over him, ordered a shot of bourbon and made sure it got to his own hand, this time. A smile spilled across his face. "Hey, guess what--"

“I don’t give a shit that you wanna fuck women,” Tim interrupted, his tone so sharp and clear he might very well be confused for sober. “That you fuck women. Just don’t do it on my time.”

Raylan didn’t bother looking confused; Tim had seen what he did, and made his own conclusions.
Raylan could only now attempt to disabuse him of what he thought, not what he saw. “I wasn’t fucking her, we were just talking. She was asking after you, of all goddamn things.”

“That’s your story, huh?”

Raylan stared hard at Tim, and thought about all the times Tim refused to start a fight. Here and now, he was itching for one. “You wanna get out of here?” It was the distant cousin of an offer.

“No, I wanna hear the band.” Tim raised his beer to Raylan. “And I wanna drink.”

“Come back to the table, then.” Raylan’s tone was soft, caked with unaired laughter. Nonchalant, even, like this mix-up was a joke they were both in on.

Tim knew better, so he served the tone right back to Raylan, smile and all. “I’m good here. Better view.”

It was just as well, Raylan thought, for Tim to take a moment and cool down. Raylan got a beer to take back to his booth and left Tim with the bill and a look that said, There is something wrong with you, and You come see me when you’ve figured out what.

The band started up again to the dull roar of mild applause. Tim hollered from his seat far in back, clapped obnoxiously.

The girl came around a short time after Raylan. She approached with caution, inadvertently giving Tim time to get a look at her throwback ’90s punk attire, and realize that with the black skinny jeans and oversized flannel, they were inexplicably wearing the same outfit.

With a slight drawl that either claimed her as a daughter of the south or spoke to her utter bemusement at being set on this errand, she said, "Your boyfriend’s looking for ya.”

She was pretty, young, and Tim almost bought Raylan’s story. She looked embarrassed enough to be doing this, anyway.

But Tim was still pissed--about a lot of things, least of all her--and he said, “He ain’t my boyfriend, I fuck him for money.”

It was a dumb line, meant to hurt Raylan except it had nothing going for it, as Raylan was far out of earshot.

“Oh,” the girl said, sounding unsure. She’d chatted with Raylan for a time, and had been swiftly won-over with his line when she’d asked if his friend was seeing anybody: If it was anybody but me, I'd tell you to go forth and conquer. But, you see, I'm biased.

She didn’t know what to say, now, to this man who hardly seemed the prize Raylan had built him up to be. She settled on the politely diplomatic, “That’s… weird.”

“You’re fucking weird.” Tim didn’t speak with any malice. His tone was flat, as uninspired as his comeback. He didn’t know this girl, never mind what he ought to say to her. Tim’s confrontation wasn’t with her, it was with Raylan. And if Raylan saw a means to sideline that inevitability by sending a messenger to corral Tim’s good favor, he didn’t know Tim like he thought.

This girl had his number, though. Affronted, she said, “You’re drunk.”

Tim ginned up a smile. “Yes ma’am.”
Ill-tempered asshole was not Tim’s usual fare, even in new company. Cautious, certainly, though he managed to save the fact that he could be a handful for when acquaintances turned to friends, often as a means to test their mettle. But he had something weighing heavy on his mind--had been, all week--and now he meant to drown it. Even with the beer coupled with the stiffer stuff, a single thought buoyed upwards. Leave.

The girl, at least, seemed to receive the message. No sooner had she left did Raylan himself appear. He didn’t even bother bringing with him an empty glass; this was an errand for Tim, and Raylan wouldn’t dress it up any.

“Kimberly come by here?”

“Her name is Kimberly?” Somehow, that made it worse.

But Raylan didn’t seem pressed, which Tim figured meant Kimberly didn’t race back to tattle on his behavior. Tim paid and left an unintentionally hefty tip at the bar, then slid off his barstool and stood very near to Raylan. He looked at him, then, unabashedly. He studied the set in Raylan’s jaw and the squint of his eyes, just to be certain there was still an interested party in there, somewhere, and Tim hadn’t squandered his goodwill by being petty about the girl. Tim said, “You wanna go? It’s cold in here.”

“I got some news to break to you about outside,” Raylan joked. He wasn’t adverse to the idea, but it wasn’t what he’d been expecting. The long, leisurely night drinking to bad music and good conversation seemed suddenly as far away as it had been a week ago, where it was just the product of wishful thinking in Lexington.

“Cramped. I mean.” Tim forgot--again--that he and Raylan didn’t share the same points of reference. Why Tim even thought to use a coded phrase he’d picked up from some fellow veterans years ago--let alone one he’d never used himself--was something he chalked up to his head being out of sorts.

Perhaps most embarrassingly of all, Raylan seemed to pick up on Tim’s meaning. “Okay.”

They collected their coats and left the warmth of the bar for the falling temperatures outside. Raylan watched Tim tug on his immense parka in the doorway, and didn’t help when the hood got stuck and Tim did some ineloquent dance to fish it out. Raylan wasn’t too forward until they left, when he instantly slipped his hand into Tim’s, bumped their shoulders, and pressed a kiss into the side of Tim’s head, catching just the top of his ear.

On the few occasions they’d done this previous, Tim used to wonder what the point of getting out of town was if Raylan wouldn’t flirt with him in public, though they both knew he wasn’t going to ask. If it bothered him enough, Tim would instigate things on his own--or, such was the lie they’d agreed upon. He’d stopped wondering very quickly, and decided to get by on what was given.

Outside, Tim quickened his pace, wanting to put distance between himself, Raylan, and the bar. Raylan's long strides caught up with him, however, and they ended up walking side by side anyway. Their hands brushed until it was cold enough that they pocketed them.

A couple of blocks later, Tim disappeared into a convenience store, claiming he had to piss. He returned with a bottle of cheap bourbon in his jacket. Raylan was surprised--not that Tim was still drinking, but that he might have stolen the bottle.

His concerns were unfounded, however, after Tim broke the cap, took a swig, and grumbled about the markup.
They walked through snow-covered Louisville. Glowing-orange streetlamps lit their way, but the night was heavy enough that the combined effect gave their path a muddied purple hue. Cars passed slowly along the streets, but the inclimate weather left the sidewalks mostly clear of foot-traffic. They followed the main drag, weaving in and out of side streets and alleyways, until the streetscape opened up to reveal the Second Street Bridge.

They set upon it purposefully, with Tim leading the way. The cold biting at his face, the quiet--each had the added effect of improving his attitude. It hadn’t been the date Raylan envisioned, but Tim liked this better: his company, shared only with Raylan, and a bottle passing between them more easily than words.

“You were an asshole tonight,” Tim informed Raylan while slowing to a stop midway across the bridge. He got right up to the railing, folded his arms over the snow-covered steel beam, and stared out across the Ohio river. “I was one, too, but you were one, first.”

Raylan joined Tim at the edge. Mindful of the odd gust of wind, he kept a hand on his hat. The longer they seemed to stand there, staring into a whirling mess of snow and the darkness beyond, the milder the scene became. The ruckus felt somehow steady and constant in a way both men were readily accustomed. Raylan withdrew his hand from his hat and rested it across Tim’s shoulders. Tim stepped back and sideways into the gesture, and Raylan caught his meaning. His arm dipped further down and around, snaked it into the unzipped front of Tim’s parka, until he had Tim in a loose hug. Sharing warmth and proximity, they stood silent and unencumbered by the demands of conversation.

With his hand sandwiched between Tim’s shirt and his coat, Raylan could feel his heartbeat. It seemed fast, despite Tim’s even breathing and continued alcohol intake.

Raylan continued to loom over Tim when he asked, “What do you think about getting out of here?”

Tim frowned. Driving back tonight seemed like a poor idea; they were both a little sloshed.

“Out of Kentucky,” Raylan specified, his voice warm, like he found it funny Tim didn't guess that immediately.

Tim took in the view a while longer. It was true, Kentucky wasn't much to look at from most angles, but there was cause to his being there. Raylan's, even more so.

“And go where?”

“Fuck if I know. Wyoming.”

“Two queers in Wyoming? Ain’t that original.”

“Wyoming, Texas, New York. Anywhere you wanna go.” Raylan looked out at the dark, still waters below them. As the falling snow disappeared into its depths, Raylan imagined some warmer relation. “Hawaii. I been once, like heaven on earth.” He split from Tim so that he could see his face as he spoke. Raylan brushed a hand over the side of Tim's head, catching the snow in his hair, brushing an ear with his thumb. Tim was cold. “Shit. Alaska, if you like all this so much.”

"Uh-huh. With little Willa strapped to your chest, wrapped in whale blubber?"


"How 'bout Afghanistan?" Tim asked, and Raylan was silent. The snow began to fall a little harder, now in big, fat flakes that dusted their shoulders and found the open lip of the bourbon bottle.
Raylan made a soft noise--just doubt on his breath, nothing conjured into words. It was just like Tim to take romantic ramblings and twist them, shock their core sentimentalities with his own brand of biting--if not outright cynical--truth-telling. To Tim, the beaches of Hawaii were just as likely a new homestead as a country under occupation.

Except, as Raylan very well knew, Afghanistan wasn't such a far-away place for Tim. Like Harlan County dogged Raylan, Afghanistan crepted into Tim's life, found seemingly innocuous footholds and staked a claim.

Tim wet his lips and knew he couldn't take the comment back. This wasn't how he'd planned to make his intentions known, but the bourbon in his system loosened his tongue. Raylan's flaunted infidelities didn't exactly settle things, neither.

He admitted lowly, “I been thinking about re-enlisting.”

“Tim,” Raylan could only shake his head in a slow display of confusion. A question hadn’t come to him yet, and he seemed to wait, lips parted, for it to materialize.

“I don’t know,” Tim said, addressing what he presumed was Raylan’s unvoiced disapproval. “It was my life. I miss it.” Tim shrugged, didn’t look away when Raylan met his gaze. He wasn’t ashamed of himself for thinking this way.

“You don’t like this?” Raylan brought a hand to Tim’s hip almost thoughtlessly--and in the gesture, Tim couldn’t decide if he meant being a Marshal with that piece of tin on his belt, or being with Raylan. “You’re good at it.”

Tim supposed that was his answer. “I was a better soldier.”

Tim leaned further over the railing, narrowed his eyes like there was anything worth seeing out there. Raylan guessed this was about the shooting, how Tim didn't just walk away from it with impunity. How the process was, even--that he should take time and think about it, wallow in it. The way this confession looked to Raylan, Tim wanted to go back to a time--and indeed, a place--where he wasn't made to doubt himself.

But to say so would just aggravate things further, so Raylan didn't argue Tim's feelings. He'd learned that was never a fight to be won.

And because he'd been toying with the notion for some time, Raylan also figured--because hell if he hadn't felt the same coming back to Kentucky--a sudden, radical departure was Tim's way of saying he felt too grown, too stretched thin by obligations, wants, and realities. And he wanted something simpler.

Now, he had a relationship with a coworker, a male coworker, a male coworker with a great sweeping history with women, a male coworker with a kid, a male coworker who wore a cowboy hat. It was a cumulatively rocky posting--enough even to send the most steadfast of men scrambling for familiar ground.

“Yeah. Well. War’s over, didn’t you hear?” Raylan waved a dismissive hand before stuffing it back into his pocket. Christ, it was cold. "Combat operations--done."

Tim shot him a flat look before he realized Raylan wasn't trying to be funny. Tim wasn't going to argue the reality of that term so he said, purposefully flippant, "Well, the other war, then. I ain't picky."

"You're the restless type," Raylan said, and spoke in such a way as to give the title some prestige.
"Hell, I know that life. I been at no fewer than half a dozen offices, and I ain't done, yet." He studied Tim, seemed to set upon him with a hard look that doubled for angry. "But re-enlisting ain't a step forward, it's a great leap back."

"I don’t see it that way," Tim said, calm and precise where Raylan was quickly fraying.

"No, I suppose you wouldn't."

Raylan took a step back, like he needed to see Tim from a distance to get everything in check. Infuriatingly, nothing seemed out of place. Tim stood relaxed, even at ease despite the shot he’d fired. That’s how Raylan took it, anyway—a gut shot, uncalled for and not a thing a man does if he knows any better. Out of pride, he takes care with his work.

"The fuck are we standing around in the snow for,” Raylan muttered, quietly and unintended for Tim. He took a moment to compose himself and ready for another, more precise counterattack. Raylan got right back into the place he'd occupied, intimately close with Tim. He used the proximity like a demonstration of strength.

“I hope you don’t,” he said, and took pains with his tone not to confuse his words for anything shy of an order. “If I got any pull in this, I hope you decide against it.”

"You do," Tim allowed, but he sounded so far away, Raylan worried he'd already lost him.

“Ain’t you too old for that now, anyway?” Raylan asked.

“That’s right kind of you to say.” Tim spoke with some bite, confirming at least one thing for Raylan: he wasn't wholly lost to the idea if he still held some misplaced sensitivity about his ability to see it through.

“Out of shape, too.”

“Thanks.”

Tim started back the way they'd come along the bridge. His steps were long and assured—nothing like the cold shuffle he'd been doing the past few days.

At the street that fed into the bridge, where an aged green plaque pronounced the date of the bridge's construction in 1929, Raylan stopped. He put aside any thought or reason beyond the simplest: Tim was leaving him. He reached out, secured his grip around Tim's swinging forearm, the one with the hand clamped around the bourbon bottle.

“I’m sorry,” Raylan said. “I assume I’ve fucked up in some way. I’m sorry. Tim, I swear to you—I’m not fucking women. I’m not fucking other men.”

Tim smiled softly to himself. “I know you better than that,” he said. His tone was quiet, not Tim’s usual fare for when he had figured something out, was the clear winner in some race Raylan didn't yet know he was a part of. He was calling Raylan out.

Raylan surrendered, and made no grand—albeit, disingenuous—argument to the contrary. “Okay, then.”

Tim took a swig from the bottle, then thrust it at Raylan. His eyes were bright, his stare hard. Even knowing what he knew—for as long as he'd known it—he was still hurt by the ease with which Raylan confirmed his suspicions.
“There were two men. No women.”

“I don’t think that makes it better,” Tim said. A rare softness invaded his voice, the kind he seemed to dish out only when speaking of the veteran friends he’d lost. It was a tone specifically reserved for the dead. “I counted three.”

“Oh. Yeah, I guess.”

"I wasn't following you or nothing." Tim shook his head, served Raylan a soft look to tell him he was forgiven, more or less. Tim didn't know another word for it, because Raylan didn't need his forgiveness. He wasn't going to ask for it, anyway--they both knew that. "It's just how you are."

Raylan felt a great, spanning distance unfold between them. He stood staring at Tim, eyes pinched, like he was all the way at the other end of the bridge. He felt every obstacle like he was there--the crack in the earth between them, filled with freezing water and arched with steel.

They continued to walk. They passed the second bar, then the first, and Raylan's car, even, so that they had to double back. The drive to the hotel was made in silence.

Raylan thought about apologizing again, before he realized he’d only done so when there was nothing on the table and Tim could attribute the words to whatever ailed him. Now, Raylan’s transgressions were known--right down to the number--and he couldn’t bring himself to open the floor to further discussion. He worried what Tim would ask, or if he’d already made the connection. Tim’s funks, Raylan’s stepping out. If the dotted line was any heavier, it’d be blackened across Raylan’s face.

Raylan was relieved, then, when Tim spoke first. It meant he saw himself at fault and Raylan was in the clear.

“Listen--I thought we were both saying shit, spitballing what we wanna do, later.” Tim went to the foot of their hotel bed, but didn’t sit, didn’t even shed his coat. “Hawaii was your thing, Afghanistan is mine.”

“I can’t come with you to fucking Afghanistan.” That distance Raylan imagined was gone now; they met like a collision.

“And what the fuck do you expect me to do in Hawaii? Follow you around? Hold your gun?” Tim shucked his coat, then sat on the bed and started on his shoes. He spoke towards the berber, beige-colored carpet. “Maybe you could land a post like that, the years you put in. I can’t.”

Raylan couldn’t imagine settling in--like they were really going to sleep together, now, tonight, with all this between them. “All I’m hearing is bullshit excuses. You’ve got more talent than half the guys in our office put together. You’re good at this, good in the field. You can’t type for shit and your reports read like someone’s toddler got to ‘em, but that ain’t shit. You ever read Art’s old reports?”

Tim’s boots were only unlaced, not removed, but he stood up anyway. "Because I strive to be like Art."

Raylan regretted bringing it up. That hadn't ended well--not for either of them, really, but Tim took it harder.

He remained standing, and by that measure alone Raylan knew Tim was serious about making his point. In any other instance, he would gleefully make his embattled arguments from a leisurely position. A fight with words didn’t deserve the ceremony; no one was really getting hurt.
“Plans for the future…” Tim shook his head. The idea hardly registered in his head. He saw flying cars and nuclear holocaust in equal measure, but not himself, older, with anymore to his name than what he already had. Raylan could conceive of a future because he desperately wanted something to distinguish from his past. He could do this easily--and that was the danger. One future could so easily be traded for another, players swapped and the board overturned. But there was one glaring constant, a new but firmly planted reality.

“You’re not going to leave your kid on the mainland. Kentucky’s even a reach from where you wanna be.”

Raylan finally threw off his jacket, angry. “If I wanted to be with Winona, Tim, I would be. It’d be easier than this.”

“I didn’t say Winona,” Tim pointed out. “You’re gonna fall more in love with your little girl, and it won’t matter to you what Winona decides. You’ll follow her anywhere, get your dick sucked wherever. You really wanna try and tell me you’d choose anyone over your little girl?” Tim pulled a face Raylan thought looked remarkably similar to the one he wore when revealing he was fully aware of Raylan’s infidelity. It was sad, but not surprised. “I ain’t mad about it.”

"Tim, the only person thinking in terms of a way out here is you."

"But you can't expect me to follow the three of you."

"I'd hope." Raylan caught Tim smirking at that, and even he had to admit--it was one of those lofty promises Raylan made on occasion. Winona had come to see through them, though it was a skill she’d needed time to develop. Tim, alternatively, had never believed a single one.

“I can’t be a father,” Tim said. He sounded so sure, like it was a point of fact. With decidedly less certainty, he voiced another: “And I can’t not be one, if I’m around.”

Even without many lights on, the room was unnaturally bright. Raylan realized the blinds were drawn open, and that light from some lower room was reflecting off the soft sheet of snow that now covered the parking lot. It took some time to figure--or else Tim had shed his clothes at lightening speed--but when Raylan next turned around, took in a view of the room, he saw Tim throwing back the sheets.

“Winona likes you,” Raylan said, and started unbuttoning his shirt.

“I know. I like her, too. We like a lot of the same, stupid things.” Raylan doubted Tim meant fantasy literature and high-powered rifles. “But she’s not here for that.”

Tim sometimes thought Barbara was right to be angry, and that her concerns weren't solely the product of her privileged life and self-styled bigoted ideology. Her daughter had lost something--not when Tim came into the picture, but certainly another time over. Tim stepped into her place and irreversibly changed the shape of it. Winona had been surprised, spent a good five minutes on the phone with Raylan convinced he was joking, but warmed relatively quickly to the new reality. She’d admitted to Tim in an informal chat--itself the product of Tim answering the wrong phone on the bedside table--that their coupling was not what she would have guessed. Tim had heard the remark before and gave his standard response: “Of him or me?” And Winona didn’t miss a beat before answering, “Well, I don’t really know you.”

The conversation had devolved from there, with Winona saying wistfully, “I do know that Raylan was the best I’d had with respect to… certain needs.”
“Well, he's still got that going for him.”

And with that one quick reply, Tim had found himself ushered into her good graces.

The way Tim saw Raylan looking at him, like he didn’t even know what he was looking at--well, he’d probably have a better shot with Winona than Raylan right now.

Tim sat. Raylan’s gaze dropped just a hair, following him.

The hotel bed was a dusty blue color, like clouds streaking over sky, and Tim looked nice against it. He drew a leg up under him and let the other stretch out down the bed like an invitation. It could have been just that, without all the rest of this shit.

Raylan felt cold just looking at Tim, who’d stripped down to a white t-shirt and gray boxer briefs. He sat in the bed, but did not engulf himself in blankets and warmth. He kept upright.

“It’s tough,” Raylan said. He didn’t know what he was replying to, really, but the words needed saying. “I get that. I feel it, too. But I want to make it work and if you’d just--”

Tim interrupted, "I feel like you're still only messing with me."

“What?"

“Sometimes.”

Raylan knew what Tim was referring to, without question. When Tim came out, it was a genuine surprise to Raylan, who then pursued him--followed him to a gay bar, of all things--but, for his trouble, had his interest mistaken for carnival intrigue. Tim took a swing at him, thinking Raylan was making fun. Raylan had waited for him in the parking lot, icing his face with a generous donation from the bartender. Eventually, Tim came around, a ludacris grin on his face and the five words that kicked off their relationship: “Oh, shit. You were serious.”

Raylan made a gamble, tried to adopt a playful air despite the room feeling sucked dry of it. "You think I'm just kidding, putting my dick inside you?"

"Not that." The slump in Tim’s shoulders was of genuine defeat. The softness in his voice as he continued was at once wholly unfamiliar, yet achingly human: "All the rest of this shit."

"Since the start--well, after I punched you in the face." Tim wrinkled his nose; he still regretted that riotous display. He’d been drunk off his ass, and worse still--Raylan had driven him home, after. Kissed him and fucked him and stayed the night, after. Tim couldn't help but smile, remembering it. "I couldn't believe my luck."

"You've always had something of a crush on me," Raylan said in agreement. Even the punch hadn't hurt as much as he suspected Tim could deliver.

“Yeah.” Tim smiled. He drank from the cup of bourbon Raylan had poured him. “So, thanks. For
all this. I liked it. I like you. I like me, with you. Sorry I’m an asshole. You fuck Kimberly in the future, you pass that sentiment along.”

Something tightened in Raylan’s chest. He drank to relieve it. “It wouldn’t be like before, enlisting,” he said. “You’d go in as an officer.”

“Yeah.”

“Got to interview for that.”

“Ramirez,” Tim had the good grace to look ashamed for his duplicity, here. “Did I fail to mention he works recruiting, now?”

“You might have papered over that particular detail.” Raylan felt a fresh wave of dread engulf him. Tim had already put all this in motion, and was well beyond mere toying thought or neither-here-nor-there consideration. “Rachel would have to give you a recommendation.”

Again, Tim said nothing. He waited for Raylan to finish his thought.

“What if I asked her not to.”

“I think she’d say that was sweet,” Tim said, his gaze on the bottle, then Raylan. “And a fucking dick move. Then she’d do right by me, anyway.”

Raylan looked at the bottle, too, and knew they needed to finish it.

“I’d want to give you access to my bank accounts,” Tim said. It was late, dark. The light in the rooms below them was out. “Before I go. I got the apartment leased for a while, if you keep up my payments you’re welcome to stay.” Raylan shot Tim the ugliest look, putting Tim on the defensive again. But the fight was gone, or else just saturated with good bourbon and rendered impotent. “I just want to do the job I’m best at. I think that’s important.”

Raylan huffed a bitter laugh; Tim knew how to slice him open, get at his beating heart one way or another.

“That money’s just gonna sit there, and maybe I’ll come back and drink it all away.” Like he’d nearly done, last time. “I don’t know. Use it for Willa or something.”

“You’re crazy,” Raylan marveled. “For asking me that. For doing this.”

“I’m not,” Tim said, his voice as dry as sandpaper despite how much they had to drink.

“Quit talking shit—”

“I’m so fucking relieved.”

Raylan got up from the table, started re-fastening the buttons on his shirt—he didn't know why. Tim kept talking and Raylan wished he would just stop. Tim looked about as harried as he got—a furrowed brow, a tongue darting out to perpetually wet his lips—all because of the sudden realization that he was butting up against his own life. All the things he’d done and left behind were on the horizon again. And they were no more or less the outs they’d been in the part but still, they were good.

“I can’t do this. And that’s my own shit, my own shortcomings.” Tim straightened up in his seat, squared his shoulders. “It matters that his gun wasn’t loaded.” Raylan wanted to snap, not this.
bullshit again, but Tim kept on: “Maybe if I'd been watching him a while, like I'm trained to do, I'd have known.”

It was strange for Tim to talk this much, his words so strained and infused with doubt. If Raylan wasn't looking at him, staring hard, he'd think it was someone else.

“You feel guilty about it. That’s fine. That’s normal.” Hell, Raylan felt like he was talking to someone else. Tim didn't need this conversation--he never had. “Deciding to quit your job and leave--everybody--is bullshit.”

Raylan stalked the room like he had someplace to go. He wouldn’t give Tim the prize of walking out and taking the blame with him. No, he would be damned if he didn’t sleep in that Sunday-morning-colored bed, sprawled out and forcing Tim to be the one inching away.

He turned on Tim, spat, “I ain’t even worried. They won’t let you back in because this is crazy.” There was the unsaid jab, You're crazy.

“Then they’d have turned me away before,” Tim said.

“You’re loving this,” Raylan accused. There was no thought to it--just the idea that it was the next mean thing primed for Raylan to say. But Tim took it like a gutshot, closed his eyes and worked his jaw, like it needed to stretch before the goddamn marathon of verbal takedowns Tim was preparing.

Raylan waited, hungry for it.

"Can I tell you the truth?" was all Tim said. Then, "Like, would you give a shit to hear it?"

Truthfully, Raylan didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to listen to Tim attempt to infuse reason into his insane notion. He didn't want to be convinced of anything.

Of course, Tim knew all he had to do to make Raylan listen was to impersonate a mystery. Before he was angry, deadly, or just--Raylan was curious.

It took what felt like an eternity, but Raylan sat down again, and Tim came clean.

The reason he had nothing to say to the psychiatrist was because he couldn't remember the incident--at least, not how it occurred in present time. Even now, as Tim explained it, the reality was still lost to him. He'd had a PTSD episode and seen a shot he'd taken years ago. Or maybe he'd seen this shot through, but simply displaced Lexington, Kentucky for Kandahar in the aftermath. He wasn't sure. There was sun and sky and shadows to tuck into; it could have been anywhere. It could have been a dream.

All he knew was, he wasn't sure of what he'd done until he got back on the ground, heard the congratulations, nice shot. And then he’d overheard it, some offhand comment made by local PD securing the area. An unloaded weapon.

And Tim figured maybe if he’d been present, he’d have seen something to tip him off about that. The way the man held it, maybe. How he gestured so freely with a gun he was supposedly unfamiliar with--did that speak to a senseless lack of concern for his own life and the lives of others, or the knowledge that there was nothing to fear? And hadn't Tim seen, a hundred times before, the look on a man's face when his confidence was bolstered by nothing more than an empty threat?

"It’s the doubt," Tim admitted over the tiny table in the hotel room, "That's eating at me."
Raylan never did understand Tim's PTSD. He liked to think he'd know it when he saw it, but here was Tim owning up to the affliction, and Raylan didn't want to take him at his word. "And this is how you think you're going to fix a thing like that? A little hair of the dog?"

Tim shook his head; that wasn’t it at all. “I think I shouldn’t be doing this anymore if my head’s not in it.”

-  

The night got away from them. Neither man slept fitfully--Raylan awoke several times, certain that Tim had left the bed, only to see him at the very edge. In the morning, it was still snowing. The flakes were scattered and few in numbers, and could be seen one at a time as they swirled through the air and disappeared.

Raylan called Barbara to see that Willa was settled in alright. He lied, said he and Tim had enjoyed themselves in Louisville.

In Lexington, they rehashed the argument. When that didn’t work, Raylan set about ridding the apartment of any trace of himself and Willa.

“Look. Don’t--” It took Tim a moment to understand what he was doing. “Come on. Don’t. Please?”

They had another argument. One, Raylan was quick to realize, they should have had months ago. Raylan was angry because he thought they had an agreement. They were here, doing this. Tim was angry because he thought so, too.

“I don’t want you to go,” Raylan said. His last effort was simply crafted, wholeheartedly honest. “Even if we stop what we’re doing… You shouldn’t go.”

Tim looked down, around. Like he was looking for a way to just tell Raylan, No.

"Is this about killing people?” Raylan spoke softly, gave the sentiment an air of secrecy Tim didn’t think it deserved. Raylan quickly remedied that, adding, "It ain't. You're not the type to want to kill with impunity. You're just not used to feeling like you do when maybe it wasn't earned. Christ, Tim. That's what drinking is for."

"I drink for a lot of reasons. This ain't one."

Raylan was beginning to doubt Tim’s supposed forgiveness about the affairs. “Am I one of those reasons?”

“Yeah, you’ve made your way to the top of my list.” Tim quirked a smile so gentle, Raylan would have thought Willa was in the room, monopolizing Tim’s attention. “I love you, you know that?”

The smile, once met with Raylan’s look of genuine surprise, quickly waned. “Shit. No, of course you don’t.” Tim closed and rubbed a hand across his eyes, then affixed his gaze to Raylan’s and bit out: “Well, forget I said anything, then.”

“Tim.” Raylan spoke his name like a warning, made its delivery swift and sure. And although Tim waited for him to continue, they both knew that was it.

-  

Raylan turned up at the office a few hours later. It was early Sunday evening, and the only person
there riding a desk was the one he needed most to talk to.

Rachel put aside the file she was reading as soon as Raylan crossed through the office double doors. This was not a conversation she wanted to have, but when Raylan was of a one-track mind, that hardly mattered.

He said to her, loud, and at a distance: “I’m assuming you knew.”

Rachel waited until he was in earshot to confirm quietly, “I knew.”

Raylan came into her office angry, and looking like he wanted to keep on through the walls and tear apart the entire building.

“What are you going to say?” Raylan asked. He was still of a mind to throw up roadblocks where he could. Tim would thank him, later.

“To the recruiter who came by the office this afternoon?” Rachel kept her tone level—a subconscious effort to relay a sense of calm to her Deputy. “That Tim's been a tremendous asset and I’d be sorry to lose him.”

Raylan shelved his hands on his hips, hung his head in a moment of brief defeat. He snapped to attention, suddenly, and set a hard stare upon Rachel.

“I should tell you what he told me,” Raylan said, feeling suddenly vindictive. “About the shooting.”

Rachel folded her hands neatly on her desk, like she meant to show that she had no cards secreted up her sleeves when she said, “If you think it’d keep him out of the military, it’s a safe bet it’d excuse him from the Marshal Service, too.” She softened her tone, adding, “Raylan.”

“You doing anything tonight? I need to get shitfaced.”

She closed the file laid out before her, then pulled a bottle from the bottom drawer of her desk. They'd do it here.

- “What do I gotta tell a man so that he don’t fuck off headfirst into a war.” Raylan was several drinks in and he still hadn’t found an answer. He tried: “I’m pregnant,” and took another refill from Rachel. “Nah, he’ll never go for it.”

“You already got the baby,” she pointed out. She’d had far less to drink than Raylan, though they’d made a dent in the bottle Art had gifted her when she took over his role as Chief Deputy. She sipped at her top shelf fare and thought about how, once, she envisioned only breaking out the bottle for the successes her office would see—not the losses.

“He’ll know something’s up. That’s twice now that the condom broke?” Raylan was trying to joke, to show a face to Rachel like he wasn't completely ripped to shreds about this. She smiled weakly in return, giving him that much. Then, they were both quiet. Bourbon splashed into glasses and slid down throats as each Marshal slowly came to accept the confusion they felt, the displaced fear.

“Have you tried asking him not to go?”

“You’re a goddamn genius, Rachel.” It came out mean, and Raylan ducked his head, sorry.
“I mean it. No jokes.” Rachel pursed her lips, tried to imagine what it was that attracted either man to the other—beyond the thrill of bending the rules, which they did well enough as platonic partners, in her estimation. Thinking they both must value the direct approach, she gave it her best: “Tim, I love you. Please don’t leave.”

“I’m not saying that,” Raylan scoffed. Tim’s own admission and Raylan’s failure to reply in kind weighed heavy in his mind, his heart. He dreaded that somehow Rachel could see it. He threw back what remained in his glass and then backtracked: “I’m not saying please.”

Rachel felt unsettled in her seat. The talk she’d had with the recruiting officer wasn’t preliminary—she gathered that much from the language he used, the way he didn’t want records or information on Tim’s past shootings. It was a formality, really—his being there. It worried her, and she looked long and hard at Raylan, hoping to convey the depths of her concern.

“I really think you should try.” Her gaze turned soft and she added quietly, “Even if you don’t mean it.”

Raylan did just that, some three weeks later. It hurt all the more when Tim left, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

I only want to be the worst.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Possible trigger warning for this chapter--substantial bodily injury.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Raylan was working a two-week stint in Miami the following summer. People in the Lexington office openly joked it was Rachel’s attempt to send Raylan on vacation. Privately, there were mutters of how it was likely to be a permanent one. The fugitives the Miami Marshal Service was after were known through rumor and intrigue threaded throughout all law enforcement offices along the Oxy Express. These Florida boys were the root of a very lucrative, very deadly organization.

The given reason for Raylan’s involvement was a simple truth: he was familiar with the players. He propped that fact upwards and back, used it to cast a long shadow over the reality that he was hungry for a challenge and, truth be told, a little gunplay.

But Miami was trapped in a sweltering heat wave about that time, and Raylan found the weather equally--if not more so--unsettling than the activities of these Oxy-swinging outlaws. If he didn't already know better, Raylan would be concerned for the effects each suffocating second had on his sidearm.

He’d acclimated to it, once, but a few years in Kentucky seemed to have undone all his hard work. The collar of his shirt was wet, same as down his back. The sun beat down mercilessly on his suit jacket, and in doing so help cultivate the swampy feature setting in across his shoulders. Even the night brought no relief; the air seemed to thicken around his eyes and mouth.

June bugs crunched underfoot, looking their summer best like shiny green stink bugs, but fooling no locals. Raylan applied the same indifference to his targets. He gave them a number of opportunities to start shit with him; kicked sand in their face until such a point that they’d kick back. It was fair game, if not particularly smart. Raylan got plugged once in the chest--the bullet-proof vest protected against certain death, if not getting the air in his lungs knocked right the hell out of him--and near about drowned once--no, twice--but it was a small price to pay to see a job through.

He got his last man at dawn and was on a plane within the hour. He didn’t want to spend another day in Miami. Doling out justice didn’t settle him like he’d hoped it would. He figured that was part of the reason Rachel put him to work there, anyway. Although there was work to be done in Kentucky--and one less Marshal to do it--Raylan needed a task he could work his own way. All of Rachel's attempts to pair Raylan with another Marshal quickly turned sour. Even the ever-amiable Nelson was quickly driven off on the most routine of prisoner transports.

Raylan was still angry, and it showed. Months after the fact, thousands of miles and scores of dead bodies between them--he was still furious with Tim. Tim, who he hadn't heard from in months and did not reach out to in turn. Whether that was his gauntlet to take up, he didn't know. He was new at this--being dumped, essentially. Being left behind for some greater plan. That had always been his bit.
On such short notice the flight Raylan booked took him to Louisville, not Lexington, which was just as well. Heading back to Kentucky was one thing; returning to Lexington knowing that Tim still wouldn't be there was surely another.

Raylan tried not to think about it, but his failure on that front was near laughable in its consistency. He often indulged in the idea that Tim had done this on purpose--leaving in such a way to do the most damage. He'd played the part of the generous adventurer-turned-benefactor, offering the unfettered use of his apartment and bank account details, despite putting his own few belongings in storage. It was nothing more than Tim himself described as *reasonable logistics*, but Raylan saw it as cruel.

He did, however, treat himself to one hell of a bender on Tim's dime. But that had been months ago. After his hangover waned, Raylan paid back the balance into Tim's account--hopeful that the entire exchange went unnoticed.

In Louisville, Raylan hit up several fine establishments before he found the bartender he’d flirted with months ago, who he learned was named Calvin. He lived nearby, which was more than Raylan hoped for, though he’d stuck around in Louisville with every expectation of going home with this man. Helpfully, Calvin waited until after they’d fucked to ask: “Aren’t you with a guy?”

His apartment was small, one of those narrow structures affixed along the hills and sandwiched close to a dozen more just like it. There were rose bushes out front, an aged tree whose branches stretched to inhabit four units. It was quaint, despite being only a stone's throw from the strip of street lined with bars and clubs. Louisville was funny like that; its schizophrenic set-up could easily be confused for charm.

Raylan found the bed comfortable enough, though. and he stretched out an arm to rest behind his head. The headboard was some kind of piece--mirrored, with some defining black lines cutting through it. It looked like it had come from the set of *The Godfather*, luxurious to the point of gaudy. Raylan would have laughed--but *goddamn* if he didn’t look good in it.

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

He was laid out like a meal. It was understandable that their conversation was momentarily stalled, interrupted by the slow exchange of kisses.

“That guy,” Calvin waved a hand, unable to muster much of a description of Tim. “The angry-looking one, from before?”

Raylan supposed it was fitting that Tim was getting back in bed with him, somehow. “Oh, him. It's all coming back to me now.” Raylan hoped he could get off the hook for an answer, but Calvin was curious. He was greatly enamoured with the the notion that Raylan not only remembered him, but sought him out some time after what Calvin presumed was the inevitable breakup. Raylan was undeniably gorgeous, so it wouldn't do for him to partner with someone who got huffy at the first sign of wayward behavior. Calvin prided himself on having figured as much the night he met them both, offered Raylan a free drink, and sustained a long spell of unblinking stink-eye from his companion. It was a well-made investment.

With a sound that suggested Raylan was struggling to recall, he finally answered: "He left me to be with a thousand other men, smelling of crotchrot and armed to the teeth.” At Calvin's wide-eyed stare, Raylan cleared up any misconceptions, saying simply, "He re-enlisted."

“Oh,” Calvin laughed uneasily, then settled in closer to Raylan. The boyfriend being far and away out of the picture cleared the path for him. “I almost felt jealous for a minute, there.”
"He's a sniper," Raylan added, unprompted. "I don't know if he's back with the Rangers or not."

Raylan continued spilling details, faintly aware that Calvin wasn't really the audience for it, but needing to speak, nonetheless. "Hell. I don't even know where they sent him. Afghanistan, Iraq. Syria? Jesus Christ."

"The U.S. is not engaged in ground operations in Syria," Calvin provided, helpfully. He'd read a Buzzfeed article that morning.

Raylan closed his eyes, not particularly satisfied with that detail, but not sure what he was expecting to hear from this man, either. “I suppose that narrows it down.”

Calvin pressed his face into Raylan’s side, grinned wide and silly. “And I thought the outfit was a trip. Your body is insane. What do you lift?”

Raylan laughed, but Calvin pressed on.

“Squats? You do fucking squats.”

Raylan’s laugh died on his lips. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Are you?” Calvin asked, dragging his fingers along Raylan’s flat stomach.

Embarrassment caused Raylan’s gut to twist, which was unusual. Time was, he couldn’t get enough of his bedfellows stroking his ego. But if Tim asked him this shit--bro, what do you lift, bro--it’d be a joke, and they’d both be laughing.

But Tim wasn’t there, and Raylan didn’t have to be in Lexington to know that. Afghanistan, Iraq--wherever it was that he’d landed, it might as well have been some distant planet. And in his stead, Raylan very much had a partner for the time being. An eager one, even, who was again putting his hands at the base of Raylan’s cock, and teasing his continued presence.

Raylan turned his head slightly. In the mirrors reflection, his tight frown read as an easy smile, and Calvin took it as his cue to drop into position and begin sucking him off. Raylan got hard, came, cursed, and returned the favor. He wasn’t above putting Tim out of his head and feeling good about himself. He’d done as much when Tim was still around.

Despite the blinds being pulled open on the window to the left of the bed, the room was dark. There was a lamp well within reach, and Raylan knew if he sat up and so much as fumbled for the switch, he could leave the evening as it was. Calvin could be a small act of defiance, his company the simple satisfaction of doing something--someone--Tim had been explicitly opposed to, previous.

He squinted, took better stock of the bedroom. It was cluttered and small, clothes discarded atop a long narrow dresser. Condoms and lube were in plain sight, and not just the supply Raylan and Calvin had used, earlier. There was a tawdry true crime novel on the floor, its spine never once cracked, and nary a fantasy book in sight.

Raylan genuinely had not planned to stay until morning, but morning was only a few short hours away. He dozed in the bartender’s bed, and awoke early to a faint buzzing sound. He thought it was a coffee machine, maybe, except that it was not accompanied by any warm smell. Then, clear as though he’d opened his eyes and seen it, Raylan knew the interruption for what it was. He’d very distinctly heard its use on the second to last of Tim’s last days in Kentucky. Even then, Raylan couldn’t immediately place it. But he’d soon puzzled together the sound with circumstance, intention, and place--Tim was in the bathroom, and the sound was an electric razor. Raylan had
gone, pushed open the bathroom door, and watched Tim make the last neat swipes across his head. It wasn’t a hack job; in this, as in many things, Tim had a steady hand. He’d even put a loose section of plastic wrap across the sink to catch the fallen tufts.

That had been months ago, but Raylan still saw the look on Tim’s face like he was there, now, caught in the act but unashamed of what he’d done.

“It’s certainly a look,” Raylan had said, because at the time they’d been trying for the polite tolerance of the other’s presence thing. The rationale was that Tim shouldn’t have to spring for a hotel and Raylan… wouldn’t. There was, too, the fact that Raylan never could just leave a thing behind him, let the natural order of bachelorhood realign his life into a steady stream of one night stands and too much drinking. He’d struggle a time before the poison took its toll.

Tim seemed comfortable with the change, almost pleased--like a kid, seeing summertime emerge on storefronts and window displays even before the sunshine warmed the hairs at the back of his neck. Raylan remembered trying to force a smile, but nothing turning up.

And then Tim had--without prompting--taken off his t-shirt and started mowing off his chest hair.

There were weeks of uncomfortable regrowth ahead of him, itchy and further-aggravated by the stiff fabric of his military fatigues. Raylan had thought very briefly about making it all for naught, but like Tim said--he knew Raylan better than that. They’d fucked one last time, and Raylan had held him close, then let him go.

Calvin stepped out of his bathroom, cleanshaven. “Did I wake you? Sorry. I’ve got to be at court in an hour.”

Raylan opened his eyes, let the memory fade away and succumb to reality. “You mean to tell me bartending ain’t your whole world?”

He supposed that was a good thing--Calvin took a few too many smoke breaks and left his shift early to screw around with Raylan. Watching Calvin dress in a sharp suit, Raylan imagined him as some hotshot young lawyer, and said as much--hoping the man could stand to be a little late if it meant Raylan got a blow job out of it.

Calvin grinned, toothy and bright. His erratic black hair was cowed into place by a few dollops of product. “Me, a lawyer? Shit, no. I got busted for fraud--victimless crime, really. My grandmother’s been dead for years. Anyway--I didn’t show up for my last court date and they sent these asshole… super cops after me. So fucking lame.”

“U.S. Marshals,” Raylan supplied, rising from the bed and throwing his bare legs over the side. That was a cue to get gone if he’d ever heard one. He’d fucked some lowlife who not only stole from the federal government in the form of social security cheques, he’d also been some pidlyshit task for another Marshal to handle.

“Yes! Assholes.”

“Some of us are,” Raylan allowed. He got dressed and left Calvin to make his court hearing on time.

Raylan turned up to the Lexington office sometime the following afternoon. There was no fanfare, no lobbed compliments for his tan, no praise for the returning conquerer. Not that there was cause for celebration, necessarily--Raylan had cut down about as many men as he delivered into custody.
Statistically, however, it was even one of his less bloody affairs.

Rachel let him catch up on e-mails and missed phone calls before ushering him into her office. She let him sweat a minute, her hands idly ghosting over her keyboard while Raylan pulled out one of the chairs facing her desk to a point where, once sat, he had enough room to stretch his long legs.

"What's up, Chief?" He studied her face, watched in wait for some small smile to curl her lips. None came. Unlike Raylan, Rachel was a consummate professional. Raylan, who still grinned wide or even laughed when he was called Deputy or Marshal by some lowlife, loved a good title.

"The Miami office is pleased," Rachel began. "Let's just get that out of the way. You get them all ridiculously hard." She had a string of nauseatingly dear e-mails in her inbox from just such individuals, who were themselves just the kind of men who excelled in law enforcement--assholes, predominantly. Charismatic, well-meaning, justice-seeking, but assholes just the same. She had a two-sentence, form response readied for them all.

"That's what I like to hear," Raylan smirked, Rachel's ire not escaping him.

She folded her hands in front of her, clasped them nice and neat on her desk. It was a move Raylan remembered from before, when she'd let him glare and curse and drink in her company. Raylan didn't remember much else from that evening, besides the fact that after listening to his tirade, Rachel had driven him back to the man who'd spurned it on. Tim had met them at the door, expectant. Raylan couldn't be sure--now, much less then--but he figured Rachel stuck around, tried her hand at talking sense into Tim, herself.

It hadn't worked, obviously.

"Do you know why I gave you that assignment?"

"Truth be told, Rachel, I don't much care." Nevermind the sentiment, it was far and away the wrong tone to take with the Chief, and Raylan quickly added, "You had me playing guard dog. These fellas had eyes on Kentucky as a hub, not just a buyer."

"Who told you that?"

"No one had to tell me, it's simple economics."

An interesting theory, but unfounded. Rachel spelled out a simple truth for him, hoping Raylan could draw his own conclusions: "You're not stuck here, you know."

Now that, Raylan hadn't seen coming. The Lexington office was already short one man. He didn't expect Rachel to let him go so easily. It kind of stung, truth be told.

"So Miami was, what, a trial run?" He spoke before giving Rachel's comment any real thought. If he had, he'd have been gracious, not accusatory. Rachel was giving him what he'd wanted since the day he arrived in Kentucky, and she'd orchestrated the opportunity so slyly that even Raylan didn't see it coming down the pass.

"I already knew you could handle Miami, Raylan," Rachel said, taking care to keep her tone light. "I just thought I'd give you a chance to see if you'd missed it, any."

Christ, he hadn't, had he?

The realization hit him like a coal train, hard and fast and out of depths so black he couldn't see it coming. He'd gone, re-immersed himself in the place, then darted off without so much as a parting
glance at the sands or the skyline. Miami didn't hold the allure it once boasted. Raylan remembered leaving his position at Glynco for the job, enamoured by what a couple hundred miles south had in store for him. This time around, all he'd seen was the foggy heat and swarming June bugs. It was a wasteland, not paradise.

"Okay," Rachel said, reading Raylan easily. He was surprised with himself--disappointed, even. "So you'll stay in Kentucky for a while. I appreciate that." She hacked away at her keyboard again, likely saying as much--albeit, couched in cooler terms--to the Miami office heads.

She kicked back in her chair. Raylan suspected the only reason her heels didn't hit the top of the desk from time to time was that she couldn't get the leverage. Rachel had a lot of respect for the office she occupied, but it wasn't immune to its charms.

Raylan had his strengths in this line of work. He was smart, cool under pressure, and there wasn’t much anyone could to do throw him off his game. The greatest chinks in his armor, then, were how easy he was to anger, and how quick he was to act. Rachel didn’t fool herself into thinking Raylan was any different before Tim had gone--he wasn’t. Knowing that helped her say what needed saying.

"I'm not saying buck up, camper," she told him, her gaze settling to meet his own, and drawing him back in from wherever it was he'd disappeared to. "But buck the fuck up."

- 

Tim found himself inbound for the sandbox sooner than he expected. As his superiors were wont to tell him, however, he had a skillset that put him in high-demand. The reminder always came with a broad smile and a clap on the back--giddy, childlike enthusiasm for a new toy. Tim didn't mind it so much, because the rush to get him into the field read as confidence in his abilities. And, quite simply, he was eager to go.

The heat he could taste in every breath, the sand that stuck to the corners of his mouth--it was like stepping back in time.

But one good look around told him that wasn’t so. It wasn’t like before--the perpetually over-crowded bases, guys creaming themselves over recently-established fast food options. The bases were empty, not worth the upkeep but still too precious a commodity to transfer over to local interests. Everything down to the power outlets was certified U-S-of-A.

Perhaps most glaringly, it was quiet. Of the American forces gathered, their presence was specialized, now, which meant a lot of self-important people giving orders to a jaded crowd.

“Looks different, huh?” Someone to his left said. He hadn't been on the plane, but was one of the soldiers who came to secure its landing.

“I’m betting it ain’t,” Tim said, quick and sharp like a shot. This place got his nerves up in every respect. But the fella had his number, pegging him for someone looking on over the dusty landscape with a kind of expectation, the likes of which were grounded in knowing it well. Tim had to give him that. “But it’s been a while.”

There was an expectant silence on behalf of the other soldier, so Tim gave his dates--the long slog in, the brief stint out. The soldier laughed.

"Welcome back."

"I trust it's the same shitshow it ever was?" Tim scratched absently at his chest.
"Even shittier."

Tim didn't mind it. He saw past the politics, took his orders, and was glad for them. He was put right to work, no time spared to test his mettle. That's what war was for.

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Tim wore a cap that wasn’t dust-colored to start, but got that way pretty quick.

A helmet seemed needless; he wasn't around long enough for anyone to spot, let alone get a shot off at. He spent his first couple weeks in the Afghanistan he was most familiar with--the mountains. Being holed up far and away from the action had its benefits and shortcomings; Tim could take his time aligning a shot, but after the damage was done he was the last one considered for extraction. A helicopter roving overhead would surely give away his position or draw fire, so it was often the case that he had to wait a few days or, indeed, find his own way out. But it was what he knew, and by that virtue alone, was something he excelled at.

Three months in, the familiarity and relative ease of Afghanistan gave way to the fast-paced necessity of Iraq.

Tim harbored his share of unease about the change in venue. He recalled Colton Rhodes' term for those who ended up bouncing between both occupations--a Double Winner.

He understood the rationale--his skills could be applied anywhere, really--but they were two highly distinct conflicts, with a litany of microaggressions playing out at street level. There was a definite learning curve, with little time spared to master it. Iraq was the Wild West, high-noon shit on highways--and Tim’s only familiarity with it was some shared airspace, once upon a time. He considered himself lucky, then, when he fell in with a unit who'd been around so long that neither budding threats nor the perpetually changing political landscape seemed to faze them. What could be mistaken for negligence or thoughtlessness by a casual onlooker was, in actuality, an expertise so ingrained that even the most calculated action might appear natural.

Tim’s spotter was a smart--if smart-mouthed--self-proclaimed queer from Mississippi named Quentin Hill. He was career military without the insufferable attitude about it, could do a mean Al Pacino impression, and his claim to fame was that he'd been the one to strap former President Bush into that ridiculous flight suit. All that, and he looked like fucking G.I. Joe. Tim liked him immediately.

At present, they were perched on a dilapidated rooftop, which sloped over its busted, four-story interior. The entire right side of the building was gone, lost to mortar fire. They were on the crumbling edge of a city--Tim couldn’t remember which. They were some 200 meters away from their target, a supposed arms dealer and wannabe warlord. To that point, he had all the capacity to be one--he was young, had guns, money, and a few kills under his belt--but none of the name recognition.

His base of operations had all the trappings of an auto-repair shop, but was frequented often by men on foot. They'd pass through, use the place for their own purposes. Out front, there were no fewer than a dozen new tires stacked against the building. Their Intelligence guys had an eye on this place for weeks and not once in all that time had any of them been used; they were wholly for show. A blue car was parked in front of the closed garage, too, and there was a dog that figured out how to crawl into it through a cracked window, and slept warmly at night. During the day, it retreated into the shade as it circled the building.

"Kid," Hill announced, though Tim could have been blind and still seen him. He was all long,
brown legs spilling out of shorts. He wore a bright soccer jersey and only came into view as he chased after an errant ball.

"Any others?" Tim asked. This wasn't an area kids normally frequented; the ground was too rough to play on, and they'd get shooed away by the men in the auto shop.

"He's with his mom," Hill said. They both watched as the boy collected his prize and ran back towards the street.

They'd been watching the place since the previous night, had seen their man feed table scraps to the dog, and decided to take him out next he did so. It was the only task he saw to himself--a force of habit, if teetering dangerously on what his own fanatical group would term haram. It was their understanding they'd have a while to wait, yet.

"I was with a guy," Tim started to say, largely out of sheer boredom, but sparked in part by the little family in his sights. They were some of the only people out--certainly the only mother and child--which might have read as suspicious, but both Tim and Hill knew better. Their presence carried a simple, innocent explanation: they'd awoken early to venture out and purchase a luxury in the relative safety of dawn. "He has a kid."

"You got a kid?" Hill asked, surprised. He was older than every guy in their unit by at least a decade--Tim, not so much, but the attitude remained. And Tim appreciated that more now than he would have in his youth, taking on war like an adventure. He’d very quickly had to become hard and shrewd in his earlier stint, however, but had since settled into the role. It was how he convinced himself to leave Raylan, after all. There was a job to be done, and he was a goddamn professional.

"It's his kid," Tim specified. He turned his attention back to the auto shop. "With his ex-wife."

Hill clapped Tim's boot appreciatively. "Shit, yeah. Turn those married sons of bitches. Do it for the cause."

Tim smirked. That wasn't the case at all, but it was a nice thought. "Nah. He'd fuck anything that moved."

"Sounds like a story," Hill said.

"Yeah, you’re looking at it."

"That why your ass is so busted?"

Tim dropped a foot back, placed a warning tap against Hill’s helmet with the toe of his boot. It wasn’t quite the response Tim felt the comment deserved, but now wasn’t the time for petty acts of retribution. That would come later when they next bunked at a base, and Tim had access to a freezer. He’d go with that timeless classic, the piss puck.

"Aw, you’re the sensitive type. I’d have never guessed." Hill surveyed the area again. Like Tim, he was used to conversations stopping and starting, to the necessity of their work interrupting everything from a simple reply to a single breath. "Who’d he fuck?"

"No one specific," Tim drawled. It didn't escape him that this was his first attempt at talking about Raylan--and, by that token, what drove them apart. His practiced nonchalance paid off, and Tim seemed almost as detached and disaffected as he'd like to be. The setting helped. By virtue of the job, Tim wasn't about to let himself get wrapped up tight in anything, lose himself in the past. His story was like any other he'd tell himself just to keep from going insane--it was just words. "Just
generalized fucking.”

“Broad spectrum seed displacement,” Hill agreed.

Tim grinned, but was more relieved than amused. Hill didn't invoke a single sympathetic line, but nor did he rag on Tim mercilessly. He was the ideal candidate for playing audience to such a narrative; none of Tim's problems concerned him. "You know the type, huh?"

Hill was quiet a moment before he said, "Man, we all do it."

So much for the unbiased ear. Tim felt his face flush, and was glad Hill wasn't in a position to see it. Hill slapped Tim's leg again--playful, like before, even if Tim has his doubts.

"That bother you, soldier?" Hill said it in a superior tone as to command an answer.

Tim forced a smile, let it carry out through his words. He was perfectly adept at throwing humor behind his tone even if it wasn't in his heart. "Does you fucking around bother me? Sir, no sir. I was hoping to get a piece of that, sir."

"At ease," Hill laughed.

For a long while, that was the end of it. The streets grew busy and crowded. People lived their lives amidst the occupation. Some had never known an Iraq without it--or had, but it was so fleeting a moment, it got lost in a haze of childhood memories, misremembered and converged together.

Tim and Hill remained in their tight perch for an entire day. Time seemed to drag as the hot sun traveled up over their backs and burned every strip of exposed skin, all the while warming the rooftop itself. It felt like they were being cooked.

Dusk was a welcome change. Not only was the sun traded for blessedly dropping temperatures, but their target would soon make himself known.

"You were loyal?"

Tim didn't have to strain his mind to figure what conversation they were picking up again. "Seemed easier than any alternative."

"He didn't make it hard," Hill translated. You loved him, went unsaid.

"Nope, I did that." Tim held no illusions that Raylan's indiscretions coordinated with his own unpleasant episodes out of necessity, not convenience. Raylan never did what was convenient for him—it was like picking battles. He'd sooner declare outright war than step to the negotiating table. Although he hadn’t made the argument himself--and Tim only saw that as a conciliatory gesture by omission--Raylan was pushed to it.

It was a surprise to hear the bitterness and regret in his own voice. Now was not a time to let his guard down--in this, or any respect. Tim wet his mouth with rubbery-tasting water from his CamelBak, then ducked his head further into the tiny wedge of shadow he had in the cracked roof. A metal beam was hot against his cheek and chin, but he forged a necessary compliance with the pain.

Hill seemed to take pity on him. "You know that shit's never actually about you, right?"

Tim played up his sardonic nature by answering Hill’s genuine remark with an overwrought, sorry tone that spilled well over self-deprecating joking and into the blackest humor. “You ever taste
secondhand cum? Hard not to take it personally.”

Here, Tim colored his thoughts on the matter as sly and a twinge cynical--nothing like the dull plate of forgiveness he served up to Raylan. In hindsight, it probably looked like cake and tasted like shit. Tim had left, anyway.

Still, the comment tickled Hill. "Shi-it. You ain't together no more, give him my number."

"A solid six," Tim drawled. "I'll let him know."

"Six my dick. Coming from a strong two, of all things."

“A two?”


"Title for my autobiography," Tim said. "Called it."

Hill fell silent. Activity in the window of the auto shop captivated them both. A door opened and the dog perked up, eager to be fed. The conversation, and Tim's admissions in it, were all but forgotten.

"That him?"

Tim took the shot. The arms dealer dropped into that s-shape Tim had come to expect from himself--none of that twisting, flailing bullshit indicative of a sideways entry, a little too much pull. No, the shot was clean, the drop concise. "Shit, I hope so."

“I’ll put that you said, sir, yes sir in the report.”

“You put whatever the hell you want in the report,” Tim said, and watched the dog poke its nose against their crumpled target. The graying mutt came away with the meat scraps the man had stepped out to feed him. This night, like he did last night, and every night for the past two weeks, according to their sources.

The shot was a silent one, and no one had noticed their man’s absence. Or they had, and knew better than to follow him into the fray.

Tim and Hill weren’t under orders to take out any others, but Tim wanted to wait, see what there was to see.

Hill slid down from his elevated position.

“Come on. We gotta move our asses or miss our ride.” Their pick-up was sat three miles off into the middle of nowhere, and they’d have to run to meet it. After a beat, Hill said, like an order- -“Guterson.”

They ran six more plays like that one in half as many days. Tim didn't flinch once. Exhaustion fed into adrenaline and Tim felt like he hadn’t so much as blinked once until that fourth day, putting his head down for a few hours’ sleep.

Christ, he loved this shit.
Tim slept when he could--always a heavy, necessary sleep so unlike what he'd managed for years in Lexington. Like he was putting in the hours and reaping no reward.

He figured out pretty quick what must have inspired the change. Everything was done with so much more certainty, here--when he fired his weapon, he shot to kill. There was no warning shot, no winging anybody. He ate to fill his empty stomach, shit and pissed because holed up in some sniper’s nest of his own making, he might not get the chance. He jerked off because--well, it was there. That hadn’t changed. And, most blessedly, he slept to stave off exhaustion.

The war cured his insomnia--put that on a banner and fly it over a warship.

Better still, he fell right back into the easy sense of belonging he’d found in his earlier stint in the service. Everyone around him fronted like assholes, but there was no greater sense of security and trust Tim had ever known. It was like shedding a skin, peeling away civilian life and reintroducing himself into the wild. Every ounce of fear he felt was genuine, and somewhere in that terror was a great luxury.

Every reason he had for feeling that way back stateside was lost to him, and Tim couldn’t have been happier for it.

Then, in a burst of heat and light and something so far beyond them both, it all went sideways. It went exactly how Tim had seen it go for guys before him, and how it would continue for those he left behind, long after he was airlifted to safety.

His world came apart, so easily and with such glaring certainty that Tim thought it ought to have been expected.

Despite the sole new reality that conquered his existence, Tim spent a lot of time not knowing what was going on. In and out and consciousness, alternatively drugged, delirious, and high, he watched the world pass him in streaks of color and fragments of sense. A helicopter gave way to a medical tent, then an operating table, then Tim thought he was back in the air again, until at last he awoke in a place with four walls, none of them curved to accommodate flight, or darkened to assure undetection. He’d close his eyes and the scene would change again, race forward or loop back in time. There was nothing to hang onto, nothing to ground him. Tim wasted whatever few moments of brilliant clarity he had feeling sad and alone--and scared for it.

“What--” Tim chewed the word out around a tube, and someone had to tell him twice to stop.

Soon, Tim was able to see for himself. He didn’t have any further questions.

His only solace was that it was just fucking him. What his leg didn’t eat up from the IED, it sailed right and caught in his arm, or went overhead. Hill, who had been stood not a yard away from him, caught none of it.

Fuck you in particular.

He heard they combed the area, later, and never found so much as a pop can with a rattle to it, let alone a second incendiary device. After that, he read in an e-mail from Hill about a rumor going around. [They say it was a leftover Soviet-era landmine that got you.]

Tim responded, [sounds badass. go with that.]

Hill replied with, [You don’t think I was the one who started it?] and [Get well. Go home.]

Tim didn’t know how to respond, so he didn’t. He closed his eyes and saw it all again, including
the curl of metal that shot upwards and near about split his face in half. Had he dropped into the
blast instead of leaned out, that chunk of metal would have lodged itself under his jaw, tore his
throat open, bled him right there. Like sapping a tree.

It was a thing he visualized with such pants-shitting precision, Tim didn’t think he could have
possibly made it up. The doctors were more concerned with what had become of his shredded
limb, as well as muscle damage to his arm. Tim tuned it all out; they weren’t there, they didn’t
know.

Now, when he tried to sleep, Tim heard his buddies’ screams. They’d thought he was surely
dead, else he'd be screaming, too.

One of his nurses did him a solid and souped-up his tablet's WiFi connection, established a VPN
and hijacked him a Netflix account. Tim was seven hours deep into an *X-Files* marathon when he
received a Skype call.

It had been over a year, now. Raylan hadn't contacted Tim, nor Tim Raylan. Tim was very ready
cast it off as a mistake, but his fingers brushed over the icon, and Scully's alien autopsy gave way
to a view of Raylan, angled and upward, from the height of a coffee table.

“Hey,” Tim said, unsure if Raylan meant to call or would even stay on. Raylan replied with the
same, but nothing more. He sat, watching Tim, as if he hadn't been the one to place the call, and
was therefore exempt from any efforts to maintain a conversation. Tim wet his lips, tasted the
sharp cracks of skin at the corners of his mouth, and ignored the way his own voice strained as he
finally put it to use.

“It’s been a while.” His mouth tasted like ash, and Tim felt like he had to chew through clumps to
get to arable space for speaking.

“Didn’t want to appear desperate,” Raylan said, his dry tone and expression vying to outmatch the
other. There was so much gray in Raylan’s hair and in his goatee--more than seemed appropriate
given their time apart. “How are you?”

“What?” Tim asked dumbly. “Fuck. Hold on.” He set his tablet down, giving Raylan a view of his
white hospital room ceiling while he groped along the side of the bed for headphones. He retrieved
an earbud, but didn't answer the question.

“Nice,” Raylan gestured to his own face. Tim smirked. He’d been in the hospital for almost a
month, and he hadn’t shaved in over two. Sporting facial hair was some kind of feat for him, and
almost *instinctively*, people knew it was of note, worthy of applause. Tim supposed he simply
didn't wear it well. He wasn’t like Raylan--he couldn’t try on a Stetson and look like it had always
belonged there, either.

“Is that my apartment?”

“Yeah. We’re squatters.” Raylan tipped offscreen, said something in a jovial tone Tim had scarcely
ever heard, save for when Raylan was being smart with some shitkicker or another. Tim doubted
Raylan was playing host to the criminal element, but the reality escaped his foresight.

Willa came into view as Raylan lifted her up into his lap, then adjusted the screen. She had grown,
as children do, but Tim was still thrown by all the difference a year made. She looked like a real
person--could carry herself, command her smiles and focus her attention. She was, of course,
beautiful, like her parents. Her face and hands were smeared with what looked like vanilla ice cream, which she was getting all over the stuffed lion in her hands.

“Hey,” Raylan cooed, deploying that softened tone once again. “That’s daddy’s boyfriend. You remember him, huh?”

Willa covered her face with her toy, shy. She wriggled up and off of Raylan’s lap, then squaked somewhere in the distance.

“Boyfriend, huh?” Tim waited a beat, wondered if he should have just let that one go.

But Raylan seemed damn near pleased that Tim picked up on that. His smile was wry and teasing as he reasoned, “Would I lie to a three year old?”

Tim reared back; shit, he might have had all the genius to try his luck twice over in a war, but he could still count. “She ain’t three.”

“Two and ten months.” It was distressingly easy talking to Raylan, Tim found, so long as they were talking about Willa. But again, Raylan pressed: “How are you?”

“I’d have thought you’d know.” Tim frowned, and didn’t know why he’d think that. “Why’d you call?”

“Saw you were online. Felt nostalgic for having my heart broken. That okay with you?” There was some bite to his tone, but Tim missed it entirely.

“You gotta speak up,” he said. “I’m deaf in this ear.”

Raylan took up the laptop and left the living room for the kitchen. It was the greatest distance he could go for a little privacy. It hit Tim hard in the gut that Raylan seemed to understand they needed it. "Where are you?"

Tim pointed to his ear again, then maneuvered his tablet to show his hospital room. Hyper-white sheets and walls, some machines lit up like christmas trees, railings drawn high on the bed, a small desktop Tim could pull ‘round to use, but didn’t ever, because it made him feel like he was in elementary school and about to practice his letters or times tables. Then, Tim showed Raylan the length of his bed. “And I’m down to one leg.”

“Tim.”

“I’m bullshitting you.”

“Motherfucker--”

“It’s just a foot.” Tim flipped the camera, pulled at the bedsheets, and there it was--a perfectly normal leg sat next to an empty space. Seeing it through the cornered window on his tablet suddenly felt more real to Tim than all the time he’d spent staring at the injury, himself. Prodding at it with hesitant hands. Watching someone touch its new end and invade the space it ought to have occupied. Pretending he could feel anything.

He supposed the effect was tangled somewhere in the novelty of sharing what had happened--for the first time, really--with anyone who mattered, but wasn’t there.

It was a genuine chore, then, to turn the camera back on himself, and see Raylan’s crippling expression. He looked stunned, maybe even a little sympathetic on Tim’s behalf. It was strange,
but what Tim feared most in Raylan’s response was yet more kindness. It was the bland placeholder he’d come to expect when people didn’t know what to say.

In this respect, Raylan did not let him down.

"Well I'll be goddamned."

It wasn't any shade of kind. It was strangely curious, teetering on the grotesquely intrigued.

“That ain’t even the worst of it,” Tim drawled. His gaze skirted over his leg one more time before he was able to compose himself, commit to the joke, “I got serious cotton mouth right now. Like I’ve sucked off a tube sock.”

Neither of them laughed. Raylan looked like he was somewhere else completely, and Tim felt the sudden urge to join him.

"I’m coming back,” he said. His jaw clicked as he corrected himself, “I mean, they’re sending me.”

Willa darted back into the room, giggling and vying for her father’s attention. Raylan was able to gently coax her back into her bedroom, telling her to play for a time. Tim wanted her to stay, to be a distraction, to mess with the laptop and disconnect the call, if Tim was being completely honest. He wanted to get another look at her, too, see how much she’d grown. But he knew he looked like shit, and that wouldn’t do to make a good impression on anyone, let alone a small child. He wasn’t expecting to see Raylan today, much less Willa. Even before the blast, Tim hadn’t expected to see them ever again.

Tim wiped at the dead skin on his lips, brought a hand to his hair but only ghosted his fingers through it. There wasn’t much he could accomplish in the seconds Raylan spent away from the camera, conversing with his daughter. So he gave up, and didn’t say a word to hinder Willa’s departure. Very quickly, Tim found himself returned to Raylan’s company alone.

“When?”

“Don’t know yet,” Tim answered honestly. “I could e-mail you. When I do know. If you wanted to know.”

“Yeah.”

“Fort Benning, though.”

“Yeah. Just. When you know.”

“It’s in Georgia.” Tim didn’t know why he’d said that. He followed it up with the equally unimpressive, “I’m in Germany.”

Raylan rubbed his face, tired, like Germany was the problem. “Okay.”

“Been here a couple weeks. Since it happened.” Tim said so like he believed he ought to explain his emotionless account of his injury. “Seen all the sights. Uh, this wing of the building. The cafeteria. Man, you name it. A country of riches.”

“Why didn’t you call, you shit?”

"They just sent me my stuff.” It wasn’t really an answer, they both knew that. There was a phone in plain view--sat neatly on the bedside table. All Tim would have to do was muddle through the
German and bill the call to the United States Army, hooah.

Raylan pawed at his own face, like Tim had done before him. Tim thought that was unfair—Raylan maybe felt like shit, but he never looked it. He sighed, gestured expectantly at Tim, and said, “So tell me more about your ear.”

Tim laughed, loud and untempered. It was something unreal, something Raylan only now realized he’d desperately missed.

Tim told him the story. Admittedly, it was short. No surprises, given the evidence. Tim added his own personal touches to the tale—the fact that the heat from the explosion caught his skin on fire, and even well after the surgeries cut away what was lost, he smelled like a tire factory.

“Thanks for calling.”

“You call,” Raylan said. It was an order, well after Tim had heard his last. “Tomorrow. Anytime.”

“I won’t know anything by tomorrow.”

“Can you wash your face between now and then?” It was an accusation, leveled squarely at Tim’s disheveled appearance and, Tim would expect, every other damn thing that was amiss. “Willa will want to talk to you. She can do that, now.”

Tim sighed. "Raylan--"

"Just do this for me," Raylan said, his voice raised and harsh, “Okay?”

Their goodbyes were quieter. Mumbled, nodded—neither really taking root, given their medium.

Tim didn’t sleep much between ending the call with Raylan, and issuing a new one the following night. He did see that he got an opportunity to shave, however. But a smooth face didn’t much detract from the dark circles around his eyes or the sickly sheen of his skin. It seemed against nature that a man could spend a year in the desert, become browned like a loaf of bread, and lose it all after just a few weeks in a hospital. Tim hated that he looked ill. He knew it was the complications with the surgeries, the medication, but—Christ. He was one bald head away from a trip to Disneyland.

Willa babbled in disjointed sentences as she told Tim about going to the park with her daddy last weekend. Tim listened, quietly enthralled with every nonsensical thing she had to say.

“And it rained!” she wailed, like a little inclimate weather was the worst injustice she’d ever known. Hell, Tim hoped it was.

Tim took up her offense and ran with it. “And your daddy let that happen?”

She buried her face in her stuffed toy again. She was already dressed and ready for bed, and it didn’t take much coaxing from Raylan to get her there.

“You still look like shit,” Raylan informed him. Like before, he carried the laptop into the kitchen and situated himself where Willa wouldn’t be disturbed by their talking.

“Well the whole afternoon I spent at the spa was a waste, then,” Tim sighed. “Half off on the pedicure, though.”

The real joke being, Tim had nothing better to do than think shit like that up.
“She’s big.”

Raylan nodded, smiled a little--like he could hear everything Tim wasn’t sure was his place to say: she’s smart, she’s beautiful, she looks just like you. “Mostly she’s up in Louisville. Winona’s living with her mom--Barb and her husband are finally calling it quits. She’s pretending like it’s some kind of shock.”

Tim made some noncommittal noise--he understood the words Raylan was using, their placement and purpose. But the sentiment seemed lost on him. He wanted to roll his eyes, shrug, tell Raylan that he didn’t care about things so far out of his control and only orbiting his life at a distance.

And maybe Raylan could read his mind--or else, he shared Tim’s disdain. “If I’m saying shit that don’t matter, it’s only ’cause I don’t know what else…” he trailed off, shaking his head. “How do you feel?”

Tim made a grand, sweeping gesture with one hand. “How do I look like I feel?”

“Like you’ve died a couple times over,” Raylan said, returning Tim’s wry commentary with only the truth. “And now, like you want to say that’s exactly the case.” He figured it explained why Tim looked so poorly.

Tim didn’t have an exact count on the number of times he’d slipped--that’s what one of his doctors termed it--but there was no epiphany, no golden vision of a life beyond. Just the sensation, everytime he woke up after the fact, that maybe he shouldn’t have even bothered.

But, Jesus. Even Tim understood that wasn’t something you told people.

He spinned it, found that particular sweet-spot between the notion of fate that had always dogged Raylan, and the simplicity of being that Tim preferred. “I have learned--and I think you may be familiar with his phenomenon--that if you find yourself thinking that often enough, you’re probably in the wrong.”

“None but the living think so much about how it feels like they’re dying,” Raylan agreed.

“You read that under a Snapple cap?”

“Little known fact.” Raylan turned away from the camera a moment, scratched along his eyebrow. For one brief moment, Tim thought Raylan looked about as bad as he did, or worse. Tired, frustrated--Tim was finally seeing a little of himself in Raylan, and it didn’t suit him at all.

“I’ll let you go,” Tim said.

“In a minute.” Raylan’s stare fixed on him again, and was steady. “I wasn’t kidding when I said you looked like shit. But I’ll take it.”

Chapter End Notes

I went back and forth for a long time about moving the story on in this way. I didn't want it to be a gross misappropriation of such injuries. In the end, I decided that this was ridiculous fiction, and not meant to be taken so seriously by either myself or any readers. Still, I hope to be sensitive, but if you feel I am not, please call me on my shit. There are some broader points I want to make about partnership and friendship and
shit, so hopefully the next chapter won't be the ANGST-FEST this has been.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Raylan comes to reclaim Tim. There are a couple false starts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Raylan understood there was a procedure for all things done at Fort Benning. It just wasn't much to his liking. Wait here, wait there, wait quieter--why wait at all? Raylan knew what he was here to collect and, Christ Almighty, they'd all seen the plane land.

He fell back on his particular brand of charm that oozed authority and undercut questions. It took him past the airbase, deep into a maze of buildings, and through a few locked doors.

Raylan spotted Tim first, wheelchair-bound and engaged in conversation with a number of other officers, all standing. Their Skype conversations weren’t so clear, so now that Raylan had the opportunity to study Tim, he gamely took it. His hair was a little longer after being a lot shorter, and lighter from exposure to the sun. His face was tanned and, bizarrely, Raylan thought Tim looked better than he had, before--despite the obvious. He didn’t seem so inherently tired, now. His expression was tight as a formality, but not drawn like wax paper over bone, like it had seemed at the hospital. Raylan didn’t let himself get carried away; that Tim would present anything less than his utmost best to a superior was inconceivable, no matter the circumstance.

In the brief moment between Tim’s dismissal and his sighting Raylan, however, the facade slipped and he looked entirely lost.

“Tim,” Raylan called out. He pushed off the wall he'd been leaning on and, not wanting to give Tim the impression that he'd been waiting as long as he had, left his cup of coffee behind on a nearby windowsill. Even as he approached, Raylan wasn’t sure what Tim expected of a greeting--a handshake, a kiss, something in-between? There were still officers milling about the area.

Maybe least of all, he didn't expect Tim to force himself awkwardly off the seat of his chair--a task of sheer upper body strength and incredible balance--then manage to stand partway up, and embrace Raylan in a hug.

Once they were in that space, however, the gesture seemed second nature. Raylan drew his arms around Tim, seeking to have the familiar form pressed to his. He was given that much, and instinctively wanted more, but had to hope Tim would deliver.

Tim did not.

Maybe it was an attempt not to abuse a kindness, but Tim and Raylan didn't linger, and the possibility of more was tucked away like loose change. To any passerby they gave the impression of being friends and nothing more.

It was Raylan’s task, then--as the accommodating pal--to sit Tim back down. Tim grimaced as he went; standing seemed the kind of thing he’d been told not to do, but did anyway--and often.
“Haven’t mastered that last bit,” Tim joked.

That it was strange was undeniable. Raylan had to keep in mind that, plainly, there was less of Tim now. He didn't feel that way in Raylan’s arms, only differently distributed.

Up close, Tim looked awful. Even the pleasure of seeing him again—at all—couldn't obscure such an undeniable collection of facts. The dark bags under his eyes could have been carved into his face with a spoon. The eyes themselves were perpetually half lidded, giving the impression Tim was seconds away from falling asleep. It was in complete contrast to the rest of him—his strict posture and drumming, unsettled hands. The way he seemed to be constantly—yet near indecipherably—turning his head on his neck, lolling, seeking station, searching for stability but coming up short always, always.

All together, he looked like something knotted up tight, but fraying. Each loose end was tipped with an open nerve. He was sat in a wheelchair, sure—but was wholly unsettled.

Raylan, on the other hand, looked like he always did: a handsome face sat atop a lean figure, and confident, like he’d walked off some movie set where his name took top billing. He was a cool column of blue in jeans and a sharp shirt, a little nicer than his usual spectrum of plaids. The sleeves were rolled loosely up his forearms, the collar opened at the throat. At any bar in Kentucky, Tim might have read it all as strategic peeks of skin. But they were far from any such venue and here, Raylan was only answerable to the Georgia heat.

"Thanks for coming," Tim said.

It seemed a strange thing, and Raylan wondered if Tim genuinely had any doubt that he'd arrive, like he'd said, the time and date preordained by a forwarded e-mail.

"You look good.” Tim smiled a little as he thought, Well, hell. One of us ought to be able to say it.

Raylan wasn't so out of sorts that he didn't know better than to return the sentiment. He wisely took it the other direction, amped it up like his warm tan and ocean-breeze-tousled hair was still with him. "I been in Miami."

Although Tim raised his eyebrows in acknowledgement, his eyes remained droopy, somehow. "Hey, I might have read something about that."

Again, Raylan brushed off what he clearly took as a compliment—that is, Tim keeping tabs on him. "It was just a little gunplay."

"Glad you've been keeping busy," Tim said. His tone was flat in that way he intended to be teasing, but Raylan heard something else in it, too. Raylan felt a rattle of guilt in his gut as he imagined Tim expanding on that thought. What else had he been up to? Hell, it had never been much of a mystery.

So he fell on his sword, took a couple inches through the chest as he said, his voice just this side of conciliatory, "Oh, you know me."

Raylan half-expected a stern look from Tim, a firm telling-off about not talking about that kind of thing, no matter how tangentially, or cloaked in ambiguous terms—not in a place like this. Not ever. But Tim did him one better. He looked at Raylan plainly, so that no one milling around could mistake his intentions, and even threw his voice louder like he thought it couldn’t otherwise reach just the few feet above his own head.

“They didn’t make you stand with the wives and girlfriends,” Tim said. He did not mention the fact
that he himself was not released among the larger company of soldiers returning stateside. He’d
left the plane first, and was ushered through security and a debriefing in one of the Fort’s office
buildings.

“Well, I’m neither of those,” Raylan reasoned. He didn’t know what was keeping them in the lobby
of the building, but he’d rather wait for Tim to make the first move. “Flashed my tin. Said I was
here to arrest you.”

“So take me away, Officer.”

“I gotta carry you?”

Tim smirked, gave a single shake of his head. “I’m supposed to stay here, anyway. Meetings.”

Raylan felt a little embarrassed that his joke hadn’t landed. He only meant to gage where Tim was
at, and his tongue worked faster than his head. He should have realized that Tim, who had very
much attempted to stand upon greeting Raylan, was in no place to hear jokes from an exaggerated
reading of his condition.

He went on the charm offensive, then, with a showing of his good deeds: “I got us a hotel, though.
Nicer digs than this.”

Raylan looked around, still unable to fathom what reason the brass had to drag Tim back to base
after all this. Admittedly, Raylan wondered, What more could they possibly want from him?

He put on an assuring smile, anyway, and promised, “I can have you back in the morning.”

Tim's hesitance may have been genuine, but he faltered some in its presentation. Numbly, he said,
“This ain’t my chair.”

“We’ll steal it,” Raylan fired back, not missing a beat. “What are they gonna do? Send you back?”

Again, Tim didn’t laugh. Raylan gave him this one, decided Tim was distracted. With his furrowed
brow and eyes like set stone, Tim didn't do much to disabuse him of that impression.

“The e-mail I forwarded you,” Tim spoke stiffly, haltingly, like he suddenly didn't have a handle
on even the most basic facts shared between himself and Raylan, “Said I could leave this
afternoon. I just learned about the morning debriefing a couple hours ago.” His mouth twisted and
he grit out, “Why'd you get a hotel?”

“Jet-lag,” Raylan answered easily. “Figured at least one of us would have it.”

He wanted to ask what Tim believed was being kept from him--what nefarious purpose could
Raylan have for simply thinking ahead? But to voice that concern would accomplish nothing else if
only to embarrass Tim, so Raylan curtailed his responses to simple answers.

“And you booked a flight back?”

“Tomorrow, early evening. That okay?”

“Yeah--yes.” By suring up his answer, Tim made a conscious effort to rein in the discomfort he
was manifesting for himself. It wasn’t like him to falter and exhibit unease--if at all, but never
publicly. Here, it bled from his voice and was smeared across his face in a worried expression, and
culminated in a look entirely new to them both.
Tim was more prone to exasperation for plans gone awry—not usual for the partners of Raylan Givens—but only inasmuch as he wasn’t in favor of a change; he was never unprepared for one, or unable to quickly adapt. Raylan appealed to that side of him, offering gamely, “I can cancel it, get a few more days on the rental car.”

“Flight’s fine,” Tim insisted. He seemed resigned to the fact that he’d pitched a fit at all.

“Think on it.” That was Raylan’s final word on the matter. He spotted a duffle dropped to the left of Tim’s chair, likely carried by one of the departed officers. “Yours?” Raylan asked, picking it up. Tim nodded absently, and focused on wheeling himself down the hall and towards the elevators. He’d let Raylan do that much, but chose to set his standards well before anyone got ideas about pushing him around.

When they waited at the elevators, Raylan caught sight of the slack trouser leg. He'd made a valiant effort not to stare, but between dropping to collect the duffle and walking alongside Tim, he couldn't help himself. He could see the outline of Tim’s knee, the way it cut at an angle into the crease of his pants. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary save for the fact that the line of his leg led nowhere. It seemed like a bizarre trick, even if knowing better was no great task.

There was, too, the fact that Tim had tied his other shoe to the outside of his duffle, knotting the laces and drawstrings together. If Raylan had any reservations about the extent of Tim’s new reality, that was certainly a clue. It was an eerie addition, reminiscent of a too-big, goofy keychain more to the style of a young child, but inherently macabre. Raylan was bizarrely charmed by the thing—it was perfectly Tim.

“Lot of people from the office wanted to come down and surprise you,” Raylan said.

Tim did not bother hiding his disdain for that idea. “Please be shitting me.”

“They settled for throwing you a party when you get back. Act surprised.” Raylan’s voice softened as he added, “Rachel wanted to be here. She knows. Art, too. I guess she told him. Nobody else is privy to the details.”

“I told Art,” Tim corrected. He leaned forward and punched the elevator button for a second time. “Sent him an e-mail, apologized for being a fucking brat and,” Tim waved a hand, “All the rest.”

Raylan dropped the toe of his boot between the automated doors, giving Tim time to readjust his chair and wheel himself in.

"I got hearing back in my ear," Tim said. It followed up quickly on the heels of his last comment, so Raylan didn't press after Art or Tim's effort to make peace with him.

"Foot didn't grow back, though."

Tim sighed audibly, feigned disappointment. “And they told me it was hardly even noticeable.”

They traded unfunny jokes because they wanted to or had to—-it was near impossible to determine which. Raylan had decided early in their partnership—-and again, later, during their relationship—-that there was not a situation imaginable that could demand any more than either man could give. They were too good, their skills too sharp. Tim had no fear and Raylan was without doubt in his principles. It made for one hell of a coalition.

Raylan was certain, then, that if this situation had aims to slip them up, it wouldn’t be for long.

“This hotel room got two beds?” Tim asked. He’d stepped and pivoted into the passenger side of
Raylan’s rental car without issue, although Raylan had to circle around to help collapse the wheelchair and secret it away into the backseat.

Raylan was back at the wheel when he answered, “I thought we were a little beyond that.”

Tim smirked. “Just checking.”

Raylan's hand stayed on the ignition, but he did not start the car.

The sun was beginning to set, and in anticipation threw out some nice pale pinks and oranges, a little sparkle along the horizon. The blue was sucked entirely from the sky by the time Tim could no longer keep a lid on his bemusement.

"Is this how people drive nowadays? Fascinating." He pressed his lips together, more concerned for Raylan's far-away look than the fact that they'd been sitting in his rental, completely stationary, for almost twenty minutes. "Raylan?"

"I'm happy to see you. Did that come across at all?"

He didn't snap to attention. The words seeped from his lips, but it was as if they were piped in from somewhere else.

"Yeah, I pieced it together. You being in a restricted area was something of a clue."

At the hotel, Raylan held the door to their room open for Tim. It was a simple thing--a matter of logistics, really, given the chair--but nonetheless something Raylan had never done for Tim. It piqued in Raylan’s mind that Tim had extended such a gesture in the past, but only ever amusedly, with a smirk and a gentlemanly arm thrown ahead with flair. Usually when leading Raylan someplace he didn’t want to go, and even then only ever at Art’s orders.

“Don’t get used to that,” Raylan warned him. He glanced around the room, and was relieved he put a little thought into the place he’d meet Tim again. It was nicer digs than they'd last seen, sharing an out-of-town venture. There was space enough for Tim's wheelchair to move freely, which Raylan had anticipated.

He maybe should have guessed that the first thing Tim would do was wheel up to the bed, and lift himself out of his chair.

Raylan had left Tim’s duffle in the rental car, but brought his own along. He sat it down on a dresser opposite the bed, and unzipped it to reveal a few items of Tim’s old clothing. Jeans and sweats, a t-shirt. He watched Tim get changed, and thought sadly that the hands that reached and pulled the shirt off his back seemed to stall, like they wanted to pull away the skin, too. Any dismantling Tim did, it was never in front of Raylan. This would be a first.

“Damn weird, huh?” Tim said, his grin a touch wicked. Without any brightness in his eyes, any laughter, the expression was near sinister. He worked a pair of sweatpants on after shucking his khaki trousers.

“Don’t,” Raylan said. Knowing Tim would see through his comment like glass, he added wryly, “That weird.”

Raylan noted that although Tim’s comment was made in jest, it was hardly an invitation to have a closer look. There was more leg missing than maybe Tim wanted Raylan to know. It was a hell of a thing to try and conceal, but Raylan didn’t question his motivations. Tim kept his knee, though, and seemed pretty pleased about that. Talked about it nonstop while he changed, anyway, which
Raylan figured was nerves. Or else Tim needed to reassure himself it wasn’t so bad. *Once more, with feeling.*

He was especially forthcoming with the mechanics of the thing--what the initial blast took off and what he lost during three subsequent operations. Tim sounded as though he’d been starved for information, and taken to reading his own medical sheet. Every term was clinical and precise.

Raylan puttered around the room, just letting Tim say all the shit he wanted without the image of a rapt audience. When Tim fell silent, they parlayed easily to ordering room service and watching television. A bottle of bourbon made its way to their room from the bar, too, but heavy appetites stayed its consumption.

Tim read the menu even after he’d placed his order. He laughed at something there, said, “Motherfucking Chicken Tetrazzini,” and left it at that.

Tim ate heartily, but lost much of his meal to a bout of vomiting he blamed on a combination of antibiotics, the flight, and the insufferable Georgia weather. Raylan said not a contradictory word, and only offered Tim mouthwash and a glass of water when his heaving had settled.

“Don’t get used to that, either.”

Tim stretched out on the bed, picking at the remainder of his meal from where he’d left it on the nightstand. Raylan sat under lamplight at the small table. There was a balcony at his back and he’d opened the sliding door to alleviate the stiff air in the room. A cool breeze spirited over his steak dinner.

Tim talked a little about Germany--rather, what he’d seen around the private hospital he’d had to go to after complications with his initial surgery on base. It wasn’t disingenuous, exactly--more like filler. Raylan listened and took Tim at his word, but was all the while waiting for something else. He didn’t press for anything, certain that some conversations were inevitable, but inevitability was itself timeless.

“You get to see any of it?” Raylan knew it wasn't a vacation, but there was such a thing as preserving a man's mental health.

“Had a beer at the airport,” Tim offered. And Raylan had to smile, because that was Tim's version of mental health, *to a tee.*

Then, Raylan joined Tim on bed. Neither spoke, neither slept. They remained mostly dressed and the evening disappeared under the spell of peppy local television news anchors with overstated southern accents. It was creeping past midnight when Tim finally spoke in an effort to really say something.

“Why didn’t you call earlier?”

“I wish I had.” *Before* went unsaid. Privately, Raylan lost hours of thought to the notion that Tim had somehow been reckless, and maybe he wouldn’t have been if Raylan had been pepperling his ear with jokes between missions. But reason soon calmed him, and he accepted that there was nothing to blame but chance. So Raylan covered both their asses, saying lightly, “Dunno. Felt a little jilted. You?”

Tim just stared straight ahead. His eyes reflected the bright glare of the television screen. “I’m an asshole. Would have thought that was obvious.”

“I just wanted to hear you say it,” Raylan teased. Genuine, this time. He turned off the television,
pitching them into darkness. Some light seemed to cling to the room, manifest like a mist around the television. Raylan knew it was just the fading glow and would soon pass, but he felt comforted by it, somehow.

“You’re okay,” he said. “In case you were tired of hearing just yourself say so.” Raylan found Tim’s hand at his side and laced their fingers together. “I’m glad.”

Tim nodded, agreeing. Or so Raylan guessed by the rustling he heard, the soft breath Tim expelled through his nose. They were both glad for the darkness. Like the distance afforded to them through Skype conversations and e-mail, it sheltered them from one another just a little longer.

“I miss my fucking foot,” Tim said, then sighed, corrected, “Leg.”

"How does it feel?” Raylan’s voice was soft, distant. The fact that Tim’s situation was so far from Raylan’s own realm of experiences concerned him. How could he make it seem okay when he hardly knew what he was working with?

In the dark, Tim oversaw his legs and frowned. He ran his hands down his thighs, his knees. He stopped there, not wanting to feel one hand continue down a length of limb, and the other drop off short. For a time, he could still pretend otherwise. "Like I'm reaching for it, constantly. It's exhausting. Reminds me a bit of you.”

There was a brief time during his hospitalization that Tim tried convincing himself he was glad he lost the leg. He imagined that's where all his awful tendencies, his fears, his incompatible desires, and the sickness that drew him to war all manifested and took root.

For a night he was so sure and so glad.

It took him all of one clear morning, where he was pulled into wakefulness by the sheer magnitude of his own loneliness, that he came to know better. He'd lost nothing more than flesh and bone and symmetry, and he'd very well get that last one back. It was both a comforting thought--he hadn't lost much, given the possibilities--and a chilling realization. All those awful things were still inside of him. Fate had not seen it in her sights to take them away.

Tim smiled, and supposed he ought to have been relieved he'd had time to have those thoughts as well as disillusion himself of them. It wasn't a pretty thing to learn.

He continued, his voice a little thick and dreamy, “And also, ‘cause I know I’m damn lucky.”

Raylan huffed a surprised laugh. It wasn’t often he was compared to a grievous injury, and then praised for it. “That’s sweet?”

Tim shifted on the bed, uncomfortable in a way an extra blanket or fluffier pillow could not fix. Raylan released his hand as Tim moved to draw each leg in, one at a time, to his chest and back.

“They fall asleep like it’s nothing. Kind of freaks me out.”

Not knowing what the fuck to say to that, Raylan kept quiet.

“You know, it was going well.” At the risk of sounding like the set-up to an poorly conceived joke, Tim repeated, “Really well. Missions were good, intel was better, fewer bodies that shouldn’t have been bodies, less confusion. Guys I was with were pros. Once we got a name, a location--I was set.” He folded his arms loosely across his chest, giving the impression they'd just as well be at his back, were he positioned otherwise. He continued, “Still the same bullshit politics. Security was a nightmare. But I was going around thinking, I made the right decision.” Raylan was appreciative
for the dark, and his inability to see the look of certainty set in Tim's face like stone. "I was thinking years. The rest of my life."

Raylan couldn't help himself: “Well. It almost was.”

“My, aren’t you sweet.”

Their voices were strong and sleep wasn't in the cards for them, just yet. Sensing they'd need more than a few knotted strands of conversation to get them going, Raylan got up and fetched the bourbon. Tim sat forward too, interested. He flicked on the lamps by the bed, throwing the room into warm shades of gold. It was just enough to drink by.

Raylan poured them both a fine helping, which earned him the right to the next question. "Why'd you come back? The first time, I mean."

Tim stalled, lips poised to take a sip. "I forget." He took a slow drink, savouring the warmth it brought to his belly. "You roll in, integrate yourself, sustain what you’re doing for however long you can… longer, after that.” His attempt to explain the decision chronologically came up short, and Tim couldn't remember when or why it was he couldn't do it anymore.

“It wasn’t any one thing," Tim shrugged. It was all the answer he had. “Hell, maybe if I'd stuck it out longer, I'd be coming 'round to it again.”

“You were really happy, huh?”

Tim made a face; how could Raylan listen to all that, and derive such a far-off conclusion? “It was going well,” Tim repeated. Guys weren’t dying, and he was doing his part to keep it so. It wasn’t a question of his own personal happiness. But it wasn't a selfless response to some dog whistle call to duty, either. Tim found civilians--even those in law enforcement--mistakenly converged the two. Tim supposed it made for a neater narrative, something hardy and lasting, that there'd always be guys like him, born into this world ready to take up arms. Though, Tim supposed he couldn’t look back on his service and deem himself uniformly unhappy.

“Should I have tried something?” Raylan asked plainly. He didn’t know what, obviously, but repeated with some conviction, “Something?”

“In your moment of penitent desperation?” Tim was grinning, now, at the lip of his glass, and trying to imagine what that would have looked like. He was suddenly able to, very clearly, and his shame warded off his smile. “You did.”

Raylan had asked him not to go, stuck around the apartment even after things turned quickly and irreparably to shit. Kissed him and fucked him and, although angry and betrayed, made every moment into something Tim would miss, and even hate himself a little for leaving behind.

“So why’d you do it?” Raylan minced no words.

Tim smiled. He knew this one, easy. “It’s like you going to Miami. You get to be a cowboy and shoot all those fuckers everyone else gets got trying to get.”

“It doesn’t work like that.”

“Don’t it?” Raylan sounded certain, but Tim could match him. “It's an ego trip, sure. But the evidence abounds.”
Raylan downed what remained in his glass and turned, faced Tim head-on. “I mean it. Really.” His voice was commanding and made Tim think—absurdly—of the faithful. People who lived life sure of themselves, and never in search of themselves. “And I’m not talking hindsight. I just think everything you said before was bullshit.” Raylan poured himself another few fingers of bourbon. “So. Why?”

That didn’t matter anymore, was Tim’s first thought. But Raylan had taken the time to collect him like an errant piece of luggage from the plane, had the foresight to book a hotel and the mind to share a bed with him—again, and after everything. He deserved as much of an answer as Tim could give, right now.

“I was getting the feeling like you were all I had,” Tim said. Every word of his admission was given like a tooth wrenched from his skull. And Raylan, his expression completely passive, was there to collect them one by one. “And with you on the way out…”

It was hard to say, in large part because the look on Raylan’s face suggested it was hard to hear. With another gulp of bourbon, Tim continued down the rocky path he’d invented for himself: “I’m not—this ain’t nobody’s fault but my own. I didn’t care so much about what I was doing with the Marshal Service. Felt like amateur hour and I got complacent and fucked up.”

Tim saw Raylan looking at him like he’d heard this all before, and Tim’s own perpetual echo only further confused the sentiment, made it garbled and dull rather than magnified.

Tim looked to his right, over the side of the bed and down at a section of the boldly carpeted floor, but saw far, far away. He tried again, saying only, “I was worried what I’d be without you. Sad, lonely. I’d been those things before. I don’t know why I was so worried about it.”

It wasn’t much of a clear answer, still, and Tim sounded a touch petulant even sharing it. Raylan knew he wouldn’t get any more just by asking for it; he’d simply have to wait, and be watchful.

Sated, his head buzzing warm, Raylan went back to staring at the ceiling.

“Let’s go out.”

“Raylan—”

“On a date.” Raylan made a dismissive face with narrowed eyes and a smile. "Not now, you look like shit.”

Tim dropped a hand over his heart, feigned enough fluttering to stir his hand. As if Raylan needed the reminder, Tim said, “Last one ended poorly.”

“Well, you got another foot.”

The smile that spilled across Tim’s face came slowly, and with some consideration. “You are on fire today.”

Raylan refilled both their glasses, settling the matter. “When we get back to Kentucky,” he raised a toast, “You’ll let me take you somewhere?”

"Mhm,” Tim said noncommittally. “VA hospital. You can take me to get fitted for my prosthetic. Sit amongst the good people looking for the bathroom to empty out so they can shoot up in privacy. Wait for hours next to some Vietnam vet scratching a hole in his arm, smells like sour milk and fried okra.”
It was too specific to be some imagined scenario of Tim’s, but Raylan didn’t let the reality of the situation temper how fun it was to hear him drawl the word okra. The bourbon helped lighten the mood, too.

“As romantic as that sounds…”

His glass hit the nightstand with a raucous clatter, and surely he’d spilled a gracious helping onto the tabletop and floor. Then Raylan was grinning, inches closer to Tim, making use of the bed and their shared space on it. He threw an arm over Tim, steadying himself open-handed on the bed. He hung there a moment in a final attempt to make his intentions known without going so far as to enact them. When Raylan dropped to meet him, finally, Tim turned his head slightly, down, away.

A deafening silence stretched between them. Raylan pulled back, and Tim rolled further onto his side. Tim mumbled, “Is this the carpet from The Shining?”

Very loudly and without a hint of irony, Raylan played the fool and said, "I don't know, Tim. Is it?"

Tim wished they could recover the intimacy of the dark. To have that great, endless space was a gift. To speak and be heard and to not confuse one another with hurt or soured expressions on faces leveled the playing field, reduced expectations. But it wasn't a well Tim could visit twice without so thoroughly showing his hand.

Tim sat up completely, resting his weight on his arms which had, in the span of a year, gained some angry muscle. Were he still going about throwing punches at every unwelcome advance, Raylan might be shy a few teeth.

“I don’t expect you and me…” Tim closed his eyes, embarrassed that this was how he sounded, saying what he did. “You don’t have to.”

“I do not,” Raylan agreed coolly. In his infinite self-possession, Raylan had anticipated this very argument from Tim. “I didn’t.” That went for the past year, and then some. “But I want to.”

“And if it’s pity, I don’t want it.” That was another of Tim's fixed lines. Raylan could hear the practice put into its rushed delivery.

“It ain't pity,” Raylan made the distinct effort not to roll his eyes. "But... I think you may be right about the carpet."

Tim, who had dutifully kept hold of his glass, held it out for Raylan to top off. He took a healthy swallow, then wet his lips after. “Could it be just us?” The question lurched out of him with all the grace of a belch. “Just you, and just me? Because that’s what I wanted. What I still want.”

Tim realized too late that he should not have spoken so quickly. He’d not known for a year what remained of his and Raylan’s relationship--if anything. Sharing a bed could be solely the product of their familiarity, nothing untoward. Having heard Raylan use the term “boyfriend”--to his young daughter of all people--was like finding a life raft in an ocean. But Raylan could have just used the term for Willa’s benefit; maybe Daddy had lots of boyfriends. Raylan’s next words confirmed Tim’s private fear.

“Thought you were done with me.”

Raylan was giving himself an out, and pinning it to Tim’s departure. Tim’s heart sank, but he couldn’t blame Raylan for leaving after Tim had done the same, and then some. He admitted, very frankly, “I wanted to be.”
Then, Tim drained his glass of bourbon and made a face like he’d long missed the taste. He sighed a little, huffed a laugh. “Fuck me. Did I sound that fucking stupid before?” He leaned over Raylan, no longer concerned about sharing space, and deposited his glass alongside Raylan's on the nightstand. “I did you a favor, taking off.” He sat back, stilled, but his thoughts continued to ping-pong all over the place. “I never did apologize, did I? For how I was. I don’t... I don’t know if it’d be that all over again. I sure as shit won’t be disappearing anywhere. Not far.”

“What are you on about?”

Tim was grinning, now, and drunk. “When I got to fuckin' off... and you got to fuckin’ around.”

Raylan went quiet, and weighed his chances on whether the joke was just a joke. He could live a hundred years and never be that lucky. Raylan had already failed Tim once; maybe this was Tim reaching out for whatever felt most familiar, even if he’d been burned by it. He considered a number of things, let his mind spider out to every dark recess in his head. Raylan put himself in Tim’s place, and did not like the choices he saw for himself.

“You know, you still got prospects.”

Tim went very still. “Like I could find myself a sea captain, maybe?”

“I don’t know about that, once we get back to landlocked Kentuckyy.”

Tim stared up at the ceiling, eyes hard. “Forget I said anything.”

It was a line Raylan remembered from before: something Tim used to smear whatever soft truth came before it.

“You don’t say much, that’s for damn sure.” Raylan kept his tone light. Even drunk, or sick, or in pain, Tim could be counted on to never bullshit. Even around the bizarre lies he sometimes told, there were knotted bits of truth. “Know, then, that I take careful stock of what you tell me.”

Raylan took the bourbon and left it out of Tim’s reach. He went to the bathroom and downed a cup of water, then filled one for Tim and returned. Tim drank it slowly, and willed himself to sober.

“You want me to take you back?” Raylan didn't sound so grossly pleased with himself, or mighty. It was a simple question, simply asked.

“You’re not gonna spare my pride at all, are you?” Tim couldn't remember the last time--before all this--that they'd said something genuine to one another, something that wasn't a joke or an insult. Tim wet his lips and answered, "Yes."

Raylan patted Tim's hand. "Well alright."

Tim smirked, looked away. The gesture felt like he was being denied a loan, or being told his aged cat had died and there was still the matter of the bill. Which was amusing only to him, because clearly Raylan was taking all his cues, now, from Tim in a concerted effort to avoid another botched kiss. If the touch had all the spark of geriatric cat loss, Tim knew that's what he was asking for, on some level.

It was late. Raylan stripped down to his underwear and threw back the comforter and sheets. Tim followed suit, losing his shirt but keeping his sweats. With a flick of the lightswitch, the gold light and accompanying shadows sank from the room. The room was cool and the bed was warm, and the last couple hundred nights on over-starched hospital futons and the cold, hard ground ran laps through his mind.
"It's different, Tim thought, then had to remind himself: It's better."

Raylan wasn’t without a few choice mental wanderings, himself. Admittedly, he could have been more discerning in what he had to share: “I’ve been spending more time with Winona.”

If he could, Tim would have walked away right there.

“Jesus Christ. If I was ambulatory—"

“Asshole. Give her a little credit, at least.” Raylan was smiling--Tim could tell. “We’re getting pretty good at this whole… co-parenting thing. She’s thinking she’ll stay in Kentucky a spell.”

Because it was perhaps even less agreeable than his first mention of her, Raylan did not disclose that this change of plans was specifically his own doing. Raylan had asked of Winona what Tim could never bring himself to put into words: Will you stay? For this, for me, for now? Raylan finished his thought saying, “Willa’s around. A lot.”

Tim could see Raylan was quietly pleased with this development. Like he didn’t think he could do it--this, of all things. He had no trouble seeing himself through any number of bloody standoffs with villains and wrongdoers, but parenting a child? Often, and well?

“Good for you,” Tim said, and meant it. There was a lot to unpack in Raylan’s small explanation, his attempt to report that his lack of failure on this front was cause for celebration. Tim didn’t feel selfish for not asking further after it. It was one of those things of Raylan’s--twisted in some dark, coiling, untenable mess with Arlo and the holler he grew up in--that didn’t make for pleasant pillow talk. It only needed saying; the rest, Tim would see for himself.

Tim turned on his side, and because Raylan didn’t have to reach far for it, he ghosted his fingers over Tim’s arm. It was a small affirmation of Tim’s presence, nothing more.

“You seem really okay with all this.” Raylan spoke coolly, but his comment was all tied up in being either a question or a bumbling compliment.

“Well here’s the thing--I didn’t really go to war at all. Pulled a couple stints at theatre camp. This here’s what we call method acting.” Even Tim’s teasing response lacked his usual bone-dry delivery. The day had softened them both. “You forget, I’ve had some time to get used to it.”

“A month and a half,” Raylan said, thinking, That’s nothing.

“If it helps, I’m bound to be a way bigger pain in the ass about it when we get to Lexington. Home turf advantage and all.”

“Oh, good, you being a dick. Right back to normal.” Raylan grinned as he spoke, though he knew there was some truth to the comment. He’d taken a bullet not so long ago, and it was one thing to whittle away time in a hospital, feeling poorly and not making an effort to hide that fact. It was one hell of another to find yourself back on familiar ground, but feeling no better than you were when it was somebody's job to bring you cups of jello. Raylan didn't doubt Tim had the patience for the long haul, but grace was a thing neither man had in great supply.

With his own tedious recovery in mind, Raylan said, “It’s okay if you’re not, uh, okay.”

Tim pawed at the bed. “Where’s the remote, who turned on Oprah?”

“She’s been off the air for ages.”
“This country’s changed, man.”

“She did the voiceover for some nature documentary,” Raylan offered. “Could find that, listen to her tell you how snails copulate.”

“Stop,” Tim whined. “You’re getting my dick hard.”

Their jokes gave way to silent contemplation, the final vestiges of consciousness to sleep, and that-to a small sliver of peace, all the better for being shared.

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“You wandered off,” Raylan repeated, still shaking his head. “How.”

Tim stared out the car window as they approached the airport. “This is startin’ to hurt my feelings, Raylan.”

They’d had this conversation twice over that morning, before and after Tim’s meetings at Fort Benning, but none of it stuck. As Tim explained it, it started raining around three in the morning, and the wet, dirt smell engulfed the room. He got up to close the sliding glass door--again, Raylan interjected a hard How?--by hobbling along against the wall to reach it. It was enough exertion that he’d, in effect, woken himself up. He didn’t think twice about taking his wheelchair out to roam the halls, try to tucker himself out. It didn’t strike Tim as out of the ordinary, having done exactly that for some time during his hospitalization. Now, however, there were concerned bellhops and complaints made to the front desk about his behavior.

Tim’s explanation was not well-received. With no lack of thinly-veiled pity by the hotel management, either, but not well.

"What is this," Raylan said, throwing his chin towards Tim, who had turned his head on its side. "You having a stroke, now?"

"I'm listening."

"For what?"

Tim sighed, drawled in a voice that was like sewer water over gravel, "You know, that squelching sound that comes with you riding my ass."

Raylan expelled a breath through his nose, aggravated. As a favor to Tim, he dropped the matter. "How'd your meeting go?" he asked, while sticking his neck out searching for the same kiosk he’d rented the car from a day earlier. He figured Tim would prefer the errand over being dropped off at the departures lot and being made to wait. Raylan glanced at Tim when no answer was forthcoming. His raised eyebrows disappeared under the wide brim of his hat. "That good, huh?"

"It's over." Tim said. His tone was completely devoid of feeling, and it was a toss-up as to whether he was cheered or distraught by the matter. "I am formally, honorably discharged from military service."

Raylan wished they had some of last night’s bourbon with them, to celebrate. Tim probably had a different reason for wanting a drink, but he was never one to protest a cause for getting drunk. Raylan figured he’d just as well mourn that particular loss of himself, later. Among others, he supposed.

“You’ll feel more like yourself,” Raylan started to say, echoing some small part of some distant
conversation they’d shared well over two years ago—almost three, now. Tim blinked, surprised, because if memory served, Raylan was fishing from an old well.

It had been a stakeout, just one among the many they shared. Tim could keep quiet and focused without issue, but Raylan needed to be entertained. As Tim was wont to inform him, *Those stories I tell myself to keep focused? Aren't for everyone.*

It was creeping past three in the morning, and Tim had left the warmth and comfort of their vehicle for a view from a building opposite the place they believed their man to be holed up in. Raylan continued his pestering via radio, giving Tim loud bouts of static when he wouldn’t respond.

“Our guy’s ex-military,” Raylan had said, damn near conversationally.

“You’re just now reading his file?” Tim didn’t sound genuinely surprised. “Read faster, get to the part where he’s a good shot and a short temper.”

“Brass says he was an exceptional soldier. Got a slew of medals, commendations,” Raylan skimmed a few more pages, added, “And now, two years out, he’s good for three murders and witness tampering. He’s achieved so much, our little federal fugitive.” Raylan gave Tim time to respond of his own will, but Tim left him with radio silence. “What do you think—war fucked him up?”

“Keep reading,” Tim had advised flatly. “There are two police reports there outta his hometown in Iowa. He’s been a fuck up long before anyone put a rifle in his hands.” There had been static a moment, before Tim came right back on their shared frequency and spat, “He used a rifle, that’s not me projecting shit.”

Raylan had laughed, but kept it dutifully off the radio. He buzzed Tim again, his tone teasing, “You don’t think there’s something to it?”

Tim had given a sharp answer—“I think he’s just had time to feel a little more like himself”—and then was silent. They collected their man two hours later after Tim spotted him scaling a fence.

Where their fugitive had reverted back into the monstrous shit he was in his youth, Raylan suspected an equal—if opposite—reaction for Tim. He would be as Raylan had begun to see before: a quieter Tim, his nose stuck in a book, hungry for adventure but willing to settle for experiencing it from the point of view of princesses-turned-knights, elves, and the like.

Now, with the airport in their sights, and Kentucky beyond it, Raylan found he needed a more uplifting line than Tim had provided. "You'll feel more like yourself," he repeated. “Give it time.”

Raylan had a creased photo of Willa in his wallet. Tim spotted it when he collected both their things from the security bin. He probably had a hundred more on his phone, but Tim liked Raylan for this—a *move*, it would seem, except that it was wholly sincere. Raylan didn’t pull moves; he didn’t have to scrounge for something to make himself seem genuine. He was so few things already—a lawman, a rogue, a Harlan boy—that all took decades to master. In just a few short years, he’d readily become a father.

They boarded the plane first, and even though he wasn’t in uniform, Tim got a pitying smile from the flight attendant. Tim supposed his canvas duffle bag was the dead giveaway, because people didn’t just smile sadly at every individual in a wheelchair, and cheer themselves by imagining what grotesque horror had befall this stranger. He shrugged off the instant pang of resentment he felt and
supposed, too, that she saw a lot of green canvas bags, given the proximity to the military base.

“Got you the bulkhead seat,” Raylan informed Tim.

“Oh, honey, you shouldn’t have.”

Tim wanted the window, which was cause for some concern. With a straight face and unwavering certainty, he made an oath to aid those exiting the plane in the event of an emergency, and threw in a dead-eyed stare for good measure.

“I promise not to so much as leave this seat ‘til everyone else has safely exited the craft.”

Raylan smiled charmingly and assured the attendant he’d help, should any greater calamity befall their tin can of a plane outside of a shortage of peanut packets. “I should have told her about your daring hotel room escape,” he tried to tease, but Tim wasn’t having it.

“I can manage a fucking lever.”

Other passengers boarded as Tim tucked into a book he’d bought in the airport. Raylan watched the intensity and focus Tim afforded the first thirty pages, and wished there was a non-patronizing way of telling Tim that no one was looking at him. When they climbed thousands of feet into the air, Tim finally relaxed.

Still, he didn’t look up until he’d finished, and even then he spent some time needlessly rereading the last page.

“Practical question,” Tim started, and from just his voice Raylan could tell he’d been sitting on this for some time. Tim glanced out the window, took a look the open sky before the plane began its descent. “The apartment.”

“Practically speaking, it’s still yours.”

“I left,” Tim said. Each word fell heavy from his lips, and Raylan could practically hear the weight Tim had attached to them.

“I noticed,” Raylan said, his tone decidedly lighter to compensate for Tim’s. “What do you want, a six week trial period?” Again, his humor was wasted on his despondent partner. “It’s your apartment. You’re welcome to it.” His proudness got the better of him, however, and he added: “‘Course, I ain’t leaving.”

Tim tried to hide his smile. “‘Course.”

They didn’t need to take this slow, as far as Raylan was concerned.

Tim convinced Raylan to swing by his storage unit on the way back from the airport. He instructed Raylan where to look, and eventually Raylan came away from the mess with a set of crutches.

“They belonged to a friend,” Tim explained while eagerly adjusting the height and fashioning himself a working alternative to the wheelchair. Mark was a tall son of a bitch.

Raylan rooted through the small space and plucked a few other essentials—clothes and a box of books—while Tim tested his creation around the lot. He was red-faced and chewing his breaths, after, but looked quietly pleased with himself. It was a worthy trade-off for the sweat stink.
The storage facility wasn’t so far from Tim’s apartment that Raylan didn’t feel bad about not knowing about it, maybe even clearing it out and bringing things back in earlier. But Tim had given him no indication of its whereabouts, and this was okay: to come to these agreements in real time.

Back in his apartment, Tim stood at a perpetual angle, slackened to one side because the crutch was just that, and not a neat solution. Raylan passed by him with the odds and ends he’d collected, and let Tim quietly get acclimated. There were a few differences he felt Raylan should answer for, including a window treatment of dark wood standing out in stark contrast to the colorlessness of his walls. The brown eyelets almost matched the coffee table, which wasn’t new, but had been a bitch to lug home from a neighboring garage sale, Tim remembered. The couch was new—a pewter gray color, sat low and modern, not much to Tim’s tastes—or Raylan’s, he would have imagined, if the contrary wasn’t sat before him.

The few changes spoke to a kind of weary indifference: Tim was gone, but not really. Nothing had moved out of place—even the new furniture sat in the dense grooves of its predecessors.

“You redecorated,” Tim observed wryly, pointing only to the tall coat rack stood by the door like an unwelcome guest. “You run out and get that the second I left?”

“I needed the company,” Raylan said, seemingly without irony. “There was some water damage last spring,” he nodded towards the windows, “And I never did like your couch. So.”

"My apartment, huh?"

Raylan heard the humor in Tim’s faux-outrage, and matched it with a dull formality: “You want your shitty couch back, you’re welcome to take your divining stick and canvas the nearby landfills.”

"Sounds like something a couple should really do together."

"Don't press your luck with that.”

"With what, your undying love?"

"I prefer the term sexual patience."

“I bet you do.” Tim gave the place another once-over. He liked the windows, really. As much as any person could gin up feeling for a hole in the wall.

There were bananas on the counter. Still green, and Raylan must have bought them before he’d left for Fort Benning. Tim thought plainly about the last few days: arriving at the military base for Raylan to collect him. Raylan taking him to the hotel room, immediately after. Raylan taking him back to base, then to the airport, and finally the apartment. He’d struggled against the sole deviation from the plan—a visit to the storage unit—but beyond that, Raylan had called all the shots. And Tim had been compliant.

“‘You get it all out of your system?’” Tim glanced at Raylan, who didn’t even like bananas. “That’s what you want to say to me.”

“I wouldn’t say that, Tim.” He’d been thinking it, though, long and angrily. To have Tim take the words from his mouth touched him with enough shame that he didn’t expel his readied comeback.

But his silence didn’t command Tim’s, who didn’t hold his tongue over the next thought that popped into his head.
“You wanna fuck?”

Raylan was surprised; they hadn't so much as chanced anything else since the aborted kiss in the hotel room. He kept his tone level in an attempt not to betray his interest: “Should we?”

Tim shrugged as best he should with one arm propped high. “I feel like… yeah?”

“You think that’s a good idea?” Raylan already had a hand at Tim’s waist.

“I think it’s a great idea.”

But half an hour later, Tim didn't know which was worse: the part where he couldn't get hard and didn't finish, despite Raylan's best efforts, or when Raylan was peeling off of him and accidentally knocked Tim's leg and went ghost white while Tim bit his lip, pained, and neither said anything about it.

Tim was the first to speak, after. “That wasn’t very good.”

“Yeah. No.” Raylan was laying naked on his side. He was something of a wonder--Tim thought so, anyway, and no doubt Raylan had a pretty high opinion of himself. He was long-limbed and thin, his musculature a simple progression of his body, nothing excessive or unearned. Unlike Tim and the thicket of hair on his chest and thighs, Raylan had only a sparse dusting down his chest and around his dick. His body boasted a natural smoothness and easy beauty Tim thought was unusual for a man, but supposed his view of men in general was highly particular. Tim stared at him, unabashed in the pleasure he took solely from looking. Raylan didn't seem to notice; he was too preoccupied thinking how it was people went about their lives not sounding like complete assholes.

“That doesn’t change things--”

Tim rolled his eyes, pitched a too-bright smile somewhere across the room. “I’d leave me.”

“We'll work out some things for next time. It’ll be better.”

"Logistics," Tim agreed, and spread his hands open over the bed they'd disturbed. "Like where I can stash my dignity. Sock drawer seems small enough. Cozy."

Raylan shook his head, but let Tim indulge in a little self-pity all the same. It was nice, he decided, to be back in this room. He had shared it since Tim left; the bed wasn't so precious to him by any stretch. But lying in it, together, after—that was something none of his dalliances had been privy to. He looked at Tim, who had covered up, sloppily drawing a corner of the sheets over his waist and tucking his leg up under it, too. He wasn't yet comfortable in his own body, much less his apartment. Raylan tugged at the sheets; one thing at a time.

“You ever gonna let me look at it?” He made sure to sound careless for the answer. Tim could smirk and shoot him down, or open up and put Raylan on the spot for a kindly word. Raylan would run with either.

“No, Raylan, I thought I'd hide it forever. Hop behind a potted plant every time you came near.”

The heavy drawl of his voice made Raylan think he'd chosen the former response, but Tim hummed and went for the nuclear option. He threw back the sheet. “Go crazy.”

Raylan studied Tim’s leg with a kind of grim fascination. The leg was tucked and sewn at an odd angle. The long, thick scars crisscrossing up his thigh made Raylan think of butchered meat, chunks of dead flesh tied up neat for purchase. Thinner lines made a half-moon shape around Tim’s kneecap. In their first Skype conversation, Tim mentioned having lost a lot of blood--a more
disconcerting turn of events than even the blast, because his femoral artery was severed once, low, and nicked a half-dozen times further up the leg. It almost went unnoticed by the helicopter medical team that the shrapnel in his arm had done similar damage to his brachial artery.

Raylan’s mind leapt unwantedly to Robert Quarles, who had lost his arm in his last meeting with Raylan. There had been a lot of blood--noticeably so, despite the venue.

“And--?”

Tim obligingly lifted his arm, showed off the mostly-healed scars along his bicep and deep into armpit. Patches of skin on his side were marred, discolored and angry-looking, evidence of the charred flesh wounds Tim had described to him. There was some bruising, too, and Raylan figured the area was sensitive and Tim's newly acquired crutch was to blame.

Then, without warning, Raylan dug his index finger into Tim’s armpit. Tim jerked back, startled.

“Still ticklish,” Raylan observed.

“Christ. I’m just not at my best, alright?”

“Would have thought there’d be nerve damage.”

“Well now there might be. Fuckin’ ow.”

Tim hooked a hand around Raylan's head, spidered his fingers wide and let his palm rest heavy against the nape of Raylan's neck. He drew their faces near and practically crushed their noses together. Slick teeth and grins recessed into leisurely kissing and a deft re-exploration of one another’s bodies. It was rewarding in a way the harried fucking wasn’t. It warmed them both, down to their bones.

When they broke apart, Tim shuffled to one side of the bed to stretch his legs again. The wall took in the performance, as Raylan was on his back, staring at the ceiling, and coming to a terrible realization. He hadn't thought far beyond getting Tim back.

There was no surge of panic carrying through him like an electric current--just the tired, heavy sense that he should have seen this coming. The shortfalls of his own duplicitous nature, if nothing else. He was the hero with a nice smile, the white-hat gliding in--but Tim needed neither, just a ride to the airport. He could have very well called a taxi. But Raylan was quick with an offer, and Tim readily accepted, and here they were: Raylan, with a poor idea of what was to come and Tim, who knew all too well.

Tim, forever with a read on Raylan, took it upon himself to rattle his cage.

"Don't take this the wrong way," he prefaced, knowing full well there was no other way of taking a thing given that introduction, "But, are you okay to do this? Help me? Because it's fine. If you ain't. I can make arrangements."

Raylan sat up and gave one hell of a shot at looking intimidating while stark naked. "The hell kind of question is that?"

“Are you going to be okay watching me fail at everything,” Tim specified, his tone a dull drumming as he carried out each word like he was teaching them to Raylan, one at a time. He didn’t give it voice, but his expression clearly read: And not let it color your perception of me?

Raylan’s first instinct was to object, but at least in this respect, he knew something of the prideful
place Tim was coming from. They weren’t together when Raylan was recovering rather poorly from the GSW taken in an exchange with the Bennett boys, but Tim did his part all the same, needling Raylan to get out of the office and back in the field. Raylan had seen what Tim was doing—it was a fairly obvious play—but he hadn’t appreciated it, then.

Tim mistook Raylan’s moment of silent contemplation for hesitation. Admittedly, Tim wanted Raylan by his side again. To guilt him into that position would be easy, but not lasting. He thought he’d give truth-telling a try. “I fell away from people, before. Guys I couldn’t watch ruin themselves. It happens.”

Something in Tim’s voice, the way it started smooth but ended hard, told Raylan this wasn’t just another case of exaggerated self-pity. In fact, he believed very strongly that he’d heard the last of such talk. Very plainly, Tim was afraid—of being left behind again, maybe. Of being one of those guys consumed by something so dark it couldn’t be named, certainly.

"If you start down that path, I'll tell you. And you'll stop." His tone of was matter-of-fact, which made Tim smile. He heard it like a joke.

Raylan sat up and looked Tim in the eyes. He knew when he was being made the fool. “You know, it might help if you don’t assume I can’t or won’t—" help you, be there came to mind, but were greater promises than Raylan had ever made before and kept. “—try.” He got up, out of bed. Tim might not have finished well, but there was evidence yet that someone had. Raylan left the bedroom and returned with two beers, a washcloth, and brighter spirits. “Anyway. You don’t look so helpless from where I’m standing.”

“Ah--!”

“Funny. You’re funny.”

Tim accepted the beer and drained half. “Rides to places. If I need you around, sometimes. When I need you gone.”

“So, which would you rather: an intricate system of hand gestures, or color-coded flag waving?”

“I’ll talk to you,” Tim promised. Raylan joined him back in bed.

“Well,” he huffed, still pretending that Tim having to ask at all was unnecessary, “Good, then.”

It was an unspeakable truth—that Raylan found Tim’s presence meaningful, and that he’d always struggle to say so—but there it was.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to finish this up before my new job starts. Next chapter may be the last! Thanks so much to everyone reading :)


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first few days operated under a strange, pressed-flat kind of quiet. Tim was perpetually tired, in bed hours before the thought even crossed Raylan’s mind. Raylan spent enough time alone to merit finding a hobby, something he could do besides wishing he could convince himself to join Tim sooner, but being too awake or too horny even for that.

It was only a week into Tim’s return that their nights turned uneasy. He found it increasingly difficult to sleep without the security afforded to him by the company of others who were, like himself, armed and heavily trained—though Raylan was assuredly that. It wasn’t a distinction Tim could reason through, however, and he was left feeling deranged and out of sorts. He wanted nothing more than to stalk around the house, shake off the nervous energy, but simply couldn’t. The anxiety and its resulting depression was an awful trade off, but such was the hand Tim was dealt.

He often woke Raylan—and then himself—shouting. Once, he kicked hard to untangle himself from the sheets, and accidentally made swift contact with Raylan’s shin. His body found new depths in which to turn against him, it seemed, when Tim started to—as Raylan affectionately put it—“sweat the bed.”

Tim dismissed the first incident as a passing bout of fever working its way out of his system, but it didn’t stop there. He awoke alternatively burning up and chilled in his own skin. And, oh fuck, did he stink. Which, by in large, was a condition he was very familiar with. Stationed up in a string of mountains during his third tour, he’d gone months without a real shower. It didn’t bother him to live that way, circumstances permitting. But surrounded like he was by all the amenities his country afforded him—increasingly overpriced water and soap to match—Tim felt he had no excuse.

Raylan told him he didn’t smell any worse than he would having not bathed for a day or two, but Tim was certain he reeked of stronger stuff than that. The stench was warm in his nose and made him gag in the shower, where any attempt to wash himself clean only seemed to make great, looming clouds of the stuff.

There were other curiosities—new ticks that Tim adopted with the kind of steadfastness that suggested foresight, but bore none in their execution. He made his half of the bed when he woke, as always, well before Raylan. He stored his wheelchair—now officially stolen property of the U.S. Army—in the crack of space between the bookshelf and the far well, literally as far from the door as possible. Perhaps worst of all, in Raylan’s humble opinion, Tim ate the same enormous helping of oatmeal once, sometimes twice a day.

The whole apartment smelled like it for days on end—oatmeal and aloe and medical waste. Once, Raylan slipped and said the place reminded him of a retirement home. Tim took care to bag his used bandages, after that, but went twice as hard on the oatmeal production and intake.

Raylan would ask, hardly concealing his disdain for the substance, “Oatmeal, again?”

Just to unnerve Raylan, Tim would drop his jaw and chew open-mouthed. “So versatile, so delicious.”

Raylan must have told (complained to) Rachel about it, because when Tim eventually acquiesced
to the “surprise” party thrown by his former colleagues—which amounted to everyone buying him a round at a local bar—Rachel presented Tim with a fancy slowcooker, a welcome home gift on behalf of everyone. It was a small joke only understood by the three, but the oatmeal was plentiful.

Between slow days and long ones, late nights and early mornings finding Tim just where he’d left him, everything changed. It took Raylan time to realize Tim wasn’t calm; it was his medication making him sluggish and inducing a false sense of ease, even compliance. Soon, as he phased off of the antibiotics and painkillers, Tim returned to life on a hair trigger.

An appointment at the VA went on the calendar weeks in advance, but couldn’t come fast enough. In a visit that was all of twenty minutes—a sixth of the time they spent waiting—Tim came away with various scripts for his insomnia and worsened PTSD. To Raylan, the latter read only as noticeable. The prescriptions were either discarded entirely or filled, but left largely untouched in Tim’s bedside drawer. In sharp dismissals, Tim reminded Raylan that he’d done all this before, and just needed time to settle down.

Tim was quick to anger when Raylan told him otherwise, pointed out the obvious in a way Tim was sick of hearing. One cutting comment put the discussion to bed: “How do you expect my fucking leg to slip my mind, Raylan? When I got you, who keeps staring at it, and me, who has to hear about it from you?”

Such outbursts were not the norm. They were a product of interrupted sleep, and Raylan and Tim’s quick-to-anger moods feeding into one another. More often than not the time they spent together was remarkably quiet, allowing for a lot to go unsaid.

Nor were the episodes all so neatly tied to Tim’s injury; when he did speak of his nightmares, Raylan caught references to starved children in a besieged village, struggling to stand and looking like tiny corpses when they did. Having to pass right by them because they were not The Mission—that, and their sullen faces and sunken eyes, kept Tim awake at night.

“They had zero expectation of me,” Tim had told him once, an explanation he felt was finally deserved after four nights of bruised shins and poor sleep. “I could have handed them tickets on a flight out of there or put a bullet in each of their heads—they wouldn’t so much as blinked.”

It took two more restless nights before Tim managed to finish that thought: “Some of the worst shit we ever did was turning away. Not looking.”

And sometimes, like when they passed bodies putrefying in the desert, they didn’t have to. Raylan heard that one at three in the morning, and it dried his mouth and sank his stomach all at once.

Raylan listened to the stories, and did not have an answer for when Tim paused, waited, hopeful that maybe Raylan had come across some meteoric truth Tim kept missing. He hadn’t, and there wasn’t one.

Raylan could only draw an arm around Tim’s shoulders or drag the tips of his fingers down Tim’s back—depending on if Tim had chosen to face him or not—and ask, at a loss, “How do you change history?”

- Tim used his crutch and went out during the day, running the odd errand. Nothing that couldn’t have waited for Raylan to swing by with the car, much less anything that actually needed doing. Raylan often came home to find orange juice and vodka he didn’t buy, or carry-out from a place a mile away. He wanted to tell Tim to cut the shit, to stop overexerting himself, but let it go. Still, he
was glad for when Tim got a call about his options for a prosthetic.

Tim was, too.

It was a Friday and Raylan cut out early from the office. He went home rather than his regular destination: any among a string of less-than-reputable bars, the likes of which probably found his sudden absence suspicious. Should he ever return, Raylan wouldn’t put it past regulars seeing him for a ghost.

He spied Tim sitting out in the courtyard, his crutch angled at his side. It was a new feature, the courtyard--just some implanted bluegrass sod and stone benches, a birdbath. It had been under perpetual construction for over two years, and Tim hadn’t seen it finished before he’d gone. It had been a boon, some months back. Elderly women in the apartment complex used the space to plant flowers. Some teens got busted trying to grow pot. There was a notice circulated on doors by one passive-aggressive tenant angry at another for letting her dogs shit on the grass. The novelty had largely worn off, so Tim had the space all to himself. He sat amongst bright green buds that had unfurled and spilled open for the rain and subsequent sunshine.

He was dressed like Raylan had seen him that morning, which had come to be a kind of one-sided code for Raylan to read. If he’d gone out that day and foolishly overexerted himself, Tim would have tossed his sweat-stained clothes in the wash and made a fresh start. Today, in the same dark purple shirt and black jeans he’d been wearing while making coffee, it was clear Tim had not sojourned any farther than the mailbox. He was bent slightly, elbows on the little patio table, pouring over a magazine.

Raylan bypassed the entrance to the building and approached Tim, a six-pack in hand. It was something they went through faster than usual, now. Tim heard him a ways off and lifted his head, but Raylan couldn’t see his eyes for his dark Aviator sunglasses.

“Oh, good, you went grocery shopping.”

“Just the essentials,” Raylan agreed. “Nice shades.”

Tim smiled wide. “Yeah, well, the future’s bright.”

It was one hell of a turnaround. Welcome, too, but Raylan couldn’t help but notice the red welts and purpling bruise on Tim’s forearm, and he was never one to leave well enough alone. "Nice bruise."

Tim snapped his magazine and buried his nose back in it. “Future’s also very slippery.”

“You fall on the stairs?” Raylan never understood why Tim wouldn't just take the elevator.

“The sun was out. Finally.”

“We got a window. Open it, bam, there’s the sun.”

“Check it out,” Tim said, raising his magazine so as to change the subject.

Raylan sat the six-pack on the table, cocked his head slightly to read the cover. For all the umlauts, he couldn't read the title, but the imagery of hi-tech appendages went a long way to bridge that particular gap. “They got catalogues for prosthetics?”

“Oh, sure,” Tim drawled, and turned a page. “I’m thinking of getting the matching convertible and dream house.”
“Hot tub,” Raylan said. “Gets my vote.”

“You get a vote when you lose a limb.”

“That seems fair.”

Tim was still smiling, unabashedly looking forward to putting his empty days to better use. Raylan dropped in on the stone bench beside him, shoved a beer under his nose and exchanged it for the magazine.

Tim took a measured sip. He had the sudden thought of making Raylan’s early return worthwhile, and though he and Raylan competed at drunken sex like an Olympic sport, they’d found recently that some coordination was necessary. “You ain’t gonna make a joke about losing your dick in my ass?”

“Hm? Oh, no, I know where it’s at.”

Raylan flipped a couple pages in, found the designs that mimicked fleshy human limbs, and the happy, older Norwegian couple who seemed to be enjoying them. Even for not knowing the language, Raylan figured the prices for steep. He didn't know what Tim's health insurance policy allowed, but like anything with a bureaucracy at its back, it probably wasn't much.

And surely Tim knew this better than Raylan, having seen guys go through it. He spoke to that fact—or else, gave voice to his simple tastes—by leaning over Raylan’s right, turning a couple of pages towards the back of the magazine, and pointing to a figure. “It gonna creep you out, I go with a plain steel rod?”

It was plain. And quite literally just a rod with a fleshy sack attached to one end, and a triangle of plastic at the other. The foot, Raylan supposed, if the wearer was a child's rendering of a stick figure.

Tim continued, “I mean, who am I trying to fool?”

The phrase, You don't want to be a happy Norwegian? very nearly parted Raylan's lips. He pretended to give Tim’s choice some serious consideration, saying instead, “I thought you’d want to go full Planet Terror, slap on an assault rifle.”

Tim didn’t smile, but he pressed his lips together in a way Raylan had come to associate with his trying very hard not to. “Well, yeah. For special occasions. This here’s just everyday wear.”

“Special occasions, huh?”

“Willa’s baptism, things like that.”

"You'd want to go to that?"

"Can't let my fancy-wear leg go to waste," Tim said, then took another sip of beer before handing the bottle off to Raylan, who drank it down quick. As he took in the warm sun on his face, the cherished quiet of an hour not often seen outside his workplace, Raylan thought Tim had the right idea. He turned around on the bench, relaxed his shoulders and pitted his weight against the little table, rooted as it was to to earth.

With the magazine back in his care, Tim returned to it in earnest. "Oh, good. Instructions,” he said, and began to read aloud. "Step One: Attach limb A to nub B. Step Two: Walk the earth like a fucking Norse god."
“It don’t say that.”

Raylan hooked an arm around Tim’s front, and pulled him playfully backwards. Without missing a beat, Tim stretched out longways against the remainder of the bench, bending his good leg at the knee to keep steady. With his shoulders warm against Raylan’s high and his head fit neatly into his lap, Tim made himself comfortable. His eyes never left the incomprehensible text of the magazine.

Fairly confident in his translation all the same, Tim asked, “Oh, so you read Norwegian, then?”

“Do you?”

“I seen Thor, like, eight times. In the past week.”

“You don’t have to watch it every time it comes on.”

“Can’t help it. Draws me in. All that… rich, Nordic culture.”

“Mhm.” Raylan got a hold of the magazine and tossed it onto the table. He liked having Tim relaxed in this way, and didn’t want anything between them. The magazine was only a distraction—surely, Tim had gone through it cover to cover since it arrived in the mail earlier that morning.

In retaliation, Tim snaked an arm up Raylan’s chest and loosened his tie for him, then followed up with a deft act of dexterity as he unbuttoned Raylan’s shirt at the throat. Raylan spared half a thought for what any nosy neighbors might think; the courtyard was at the exact center of the apartment complex, and nearly every unit had a window looking onto it. The thought alone tickled him, stirred a smile that sat on Raylan’s face as he looked out over the little patch of green shrouded by three stories of brick walls. It wasn’t so tall a fixture that it blocked the sunlight or cast much of a shadow, anyway, but that was especially the case now: the whole square was bathed in warm light. Like it was high noon, and not a quarter past four.

In the absence of any outside noise or disturbance, Raylan listened to Tim’s breath withdrawal, then return again: a small sigh of contentment as he quietly marveled at how far they’d both come. It was a startling thing.

By virtue of his own confidence, itself something honed and built up after a childhood of having it laid to waste, Raylan rarely left anything less than in a state of perpetual ease, so afforded to him by how he looked to the world, the authority he carried with and without the gun and badge. He felt, however, that maybe Tim—more wise and incredibly cautious, for as little good that did him—was feeling that for the first time, with him. Feeling at ease, and not sparing another thought for what they appeared to be or how they were.

It struck Raylan slowly, sadly, that they weren’t like this. Not often enough. Their savage relationship—carnal at its best, but always leading inevitably to picking at each others’ bones—was so far from this deliberately kind display that Raylan very nearly took it for a joke. But Tim wasn’t doing anything in his lap other than resting there, and when Raylan thoughtlessly huffed a sigh of his own, he found he was deeply sorry to have disturbed his partner.

He felt Tim’s eyes open. Somehow—and because of the reflective lenses of his sunglasses, there was very little to suggest Tim had even closed his eyes to begin with, except that Raylan was sure they’d opened. It was nothing more than the barest flutter of lashes, the whisper of movement in the air. And Raylan would have staked his life on it.

Raylan leaned forward, kept Tim’s face in the shade of his hat. He skipped back around to the conversation they were still having, and said firmly, "It ain't gonna creep me out. Get what you
want, Tim."

"I'll get what they give me," Tim said, sounding resigned but no less pleased. Then, he threw an arm back and sat up, off Raylan’s lap.

“Seems to be your lot in life,” Raylan agreed. He caught Tim at an angle, stole a lazy kiss, and wondered if it was exactly that attitude that kept them together. Raylan brought all the desire to the relationship, and Tim met him with a heavy dose of apathy—the kind necessary to put up with the spillover good looks, confidence, and charm. The stuff Raylan gave to others.

“Don’t go making this about you,” Tim said, and kissed him back.

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Raylan accompanied Tim to his first consultation at the Lexington VA. There, Tim maintained labored interactions with guys he vaguely knew in passing, guys who looked questioningly at his leg, so goddamn certain they would have noticed something like that. He got more of the same from staff, some who recognized his face but couldn’t place the injury.

His initial joke—“Oh, this old thing?”—went flat so many times Tim steamrolled over it with the truth: an unenthusiastic, “It’s new.”

His appointment was a tedious process wrought with ever-expanding paperwork and wait times. It culminated—finally—in a meeting with his prospective trainer, a man who met all the rigorous requirements of the monumental task ahead of him: he was a volunteer.

Tim wasn’t the type to make friends with everyone, but he was staring at this man with a look that read, Especially not you.

He wasn’t military, to start. He had the build for it, but his muscles ballooned in some places, deflated in others. It wasn’t the mark of the necessity of strength, only the affectation of power. Admittedly, that impression was somewhat derailed by the backwards ball cap. He had a broad face and small, blueish eyes; the physical embodiment of white noise.

The man introduced himself as Toby Powers, and Tim asked immediately if at least half of that name was made up.

"You got me!" Toby smiled brightly. "It's Tobias, actually."

Tim’s expression was unchanged. "No kidding."

Toby had heavy shoulders and a thick neck, but moved like he was made of rubber. He wasn't a fast reader, neither, as Tim and Raylan discovered as they went line-by-line through Tim’s file as they all sat in his cramped office. Raylan wasn't yet convinced it wasn't a gutted utility closet, for all the space and lighting it lacked. There was a stack of physio textbooks on the floor by Toby's desk, each adorned with a bright yellow sticker reading USED. If he wasn't a later-in-life college student himself, he'd cornered one in the parking lot and taken his.

"So this was your second deployment?" Toby asked.

He'd been reading over Tim’s file for at least ten minutes, and the only detail he ascertained was wrong. It didn't inspire much confidence. Tim answered, "Uh, no. My--fourth. Technically fifth. There were some months back in '07... But that's classified."

"He re-enlisted," Raylan cut to the chase.
Toby nodded, smiled, very *Classified ops? Been there, my man. Totally ran three in my last Halo marathon.* "I bet you feel pretty silly, huh?"

Besides a physical therapist and trainer, Toby fancied himself a budding psychiatrist.

Tim served him a dead-eyed stare. "I have never in my life felt silly."

Tim's wry remark sailed clear over Toby's head, and left Toby struggling for a synonym. "Dumb, then."

It was hardly a slight, and nothing worse than Raylan had alluded to with Tim, himself. But in that moment, it was the worst condemnation Tim had heard, and with no exception he took it poorly. It was quite a sight, Raylan decided, to see a man object when he wore the evidence at his feet.

“It wasn’t *dumb.* I wanted to be there. I still want to be there.” It was as close as Tim came to being outright offended, which was unusual in itself. He even tipped forward like he meant to initiate a physical altercation. But Tim circled back around to one of his more practiced displays of passive aggression, adding: “*This here* is what’s fucking idiotic. I go through all the trouble of going back, and for what? The end of my tap dancing prospects and some dipshit giving me lip.”

"You liked to dance?" Toby looked touched.

Tim shot back, "Oh, that ain't in my file?"

“I will make a special note of it,” Toby promised, his smile wide and assuring.

“Fantastic,” Tim drawled, and slumped back into his seat. “Raylan, I’m going to dance again.”

"Raylan," Toby repeated, subtling reminding the pair that they'd not all been properly introduced.

"He's my ride," Tim clarified, still smarting and looking to land any fight he could. "By which I mean I ride him. Very regularly."

"Physical activity is a great way to keep your muscles strong," Toby agreed.

It was only then that Raylan felt compelled to speak. But he figured his comment--*Son, are you listening to what he's saying, or just reading from the colorful cereal box in your mind's eye?*--would only serve to stir tensions and derail Tim's appointment further. He kept a cool head and only nodded, confirming Tim's assessment. At any rate, Toby had returned to Tim's file and was finishing up with some notes on a brightly colored legal pad.

“You really shouldn’t be using crutches, given your arm.” Toby began his comment facing his notes, but finished it with Raylan.

Raylan frowned. He didn't want to be pulled into this old battle. “There’s no stopping him,” he said, thinking he’d hit the sweet spot between building up Tim's iron will and desire for restored normality--however it came--and denying culpability in Tim's *radically stupid* decision to overcompensate, and effectively strain his remaining limbs in service to the lost one.

"Try," Toby ordered, displaying some iron, himself.

In a building that had all the acoustics of a school gymnasium, the windowless interior office somehow became very quiet. The adjacent rooms, too, seemed to follow their lead. Tim wet his lips, and it was goddamn audible.
Flatly, Tim announced, “Got a wheelchair in the car.” His expression was a masterful combination of unbreakable steel and boneless goodwill. “I’ll go and get it.”

He stood with the help of his crutches, took the keys from Raylan, and left the office. Theatrics weren’t normally Tim’s thing, so Raylan had to smile a little, thinking Tim had picked that up from him. He was of half a mind to follow him, too, though it’d be tantamount to a walk-out and mark Tim as an uncooperative patient.

“He’s feeling very disconnected,” Toby said once Tim had gone, and Raylan took it for a question, but didn’t answer. Toby already had one of his own. “He needs to be in group,” he said. “There’s a list on the bulletin board in the main lobby. Take a look, choose one that meets twice a week.”

“He’s going to love hearing that from you,” Raylan said, smiling like he did when he spotted a fool.

“I wouldn’t want to steal your thunder.”

If it wasn't the quick reply that threw Raylan off, it was surely the ferocity with which Toby began to scribble a note for Tim's file. “I realize you just met him--”

“I recommend Shonda. She’s got a good sense of humor.”

“Hold up a second--”

“He a heavy drinker?” Toby waited for an answer, but for as long as he wielded a pen, Raylan wasn't going to give it. The pen became the first casualty.

“Always has been,” Raylan said evenly.

“Always? Since he joined up at seventeen?” Toby asked like the implication was obvious. And while Raylan had to admit maybe he had something, there, he couldn't give him the satisfaction.

“Listen--this is some bullshit. Bullshit you ought to discuss with Tim, but bullshit nonetheless.”

Toby took up the pen again and suddenly, on top of feeling defensive on Tim's behalf, Raylan was worried he'd suddenly tanked his case. *Always has been* an alcoholic could read like a preexisting condition if the wrong eyes set upon the scribbled piece of evidence. “I have no legal standing, here. I’m just his--”

“Then you can go,” Toby announced. “There are transportation services available. Tim has options.”

It sounded like a harsh referendum, and Raylan wanted to counter: I know that. *I told him that.* Raylan maintained he'd have had a killer reply--something to blow Toby's ratty Mets cap clear off his head--but it only existed in theory. It's execution was stalled when Tim returned, sweat stains under his arms and determination across his brow. He was still on his crutches, with the collapsed wheelchair pinned under one arm. He unfolded it, walked around to its front, and sat himself down.

“Wonderful,” Toby said. "And, hey, looks like one of ours. What are the chances, huh?"

All smiles again, he set appointment times with Tim for the next two months, starting later that week with his initial fitting. Tim wasn't expecting such promptness--knew *not* to expect it, even. In return, he tried his best to remain civil for the remainder of their meeting, though it wasn't the easiest of tasks.
Raylan was silent, essentially excusing himself from the conversation. He'd gotten an earful already, and was pressed to think it through. It wasn't often that he was told damning truths by a man who could double for a comic book superhero sidekick. Raylan resolved not to tell Tim about Toby's no-nonsense streak, or the strange ultimatum he'd delivered in Tim's absence. Tim would have surely wanted to hear whatever excuse Raylan had readied. *You're just my what, Raylan?*

When they finished in the office, Toby showed Tim the facilities they'd be using. It looked like a work-in-progress home gym, but the bones of the place were solid. It was clean, full of natural light from a wall of windows, and all things considered, wasn't the worst place a man could be confined to for several two hour sessions every week. There were some men and women in the space already, outfitted with one or more prosthetic devices, themselves. Tim felt embarrassed for having been banished to his wheelchair, so while he was cordial and friendly--in his dry, standoffish way--with his fellow vets, he remained cold and chippy towards Toby.

“I feel like telling him, this is just how you are,” Raylan said when he and Tim left the appointment, the latter likely more exhausted from the constant attempts at spirit-lifting conversation than any physical exertion. Raylan still had a hold on Tim’s crutches, carried them like they were one of Willa's's toys she couldn't possibly leave the house without, but chose to drop a hundred times a day.

“I’d rather watch his indelible spirit slowly die,” Tim remarked.

“Hey, there’s one of your five goals,” Raylan grinned. He’d been eavesdropping when Toby provided Tim with homework.

“Life-spirations,” Tim corrected. “And don’t sweat it, I’ve already finished.” From down the side of his chair, Tim handed Raylan one of the crumpled pages he’d been given. In his chicken scratch, Tim had written as the first and only goal, *1. Do not finish this bullshit list.*

Walking the halls, Raylan recalled that he'd been here once before, retrieved a fugitive from out of his hiding place in one of the administrative offices. Raylan had roughed him up some, then walked him out in cuffs. He wasn’t dangerous, as such, but Raylan didn’t have any sympathy for bail jumpers who gave chase around town for five hours, making more trouble than they were worth. It wasn't so long ago, Raylan thought, that someone here might recognize him. But he couldn't even pull his hat down to hide his face--it was kind of a dead giveaway, itself.

“You don't like it here,” Tim surmised. He saw only Raylan's expression, not the shamed reasoning behind it.

“I thought it'd be bigger,” Raylan lied.

“More for you to not like,” Tim agreed.

They were back in the car and Tim still hadn't made a stink about the wheelchair.

“You don’t have to stay for this,” Tim said. He was slowly beginning to realize the enormity of what was before him, and took to making excuses for not being seen, should the process knock him on his ass. “No reason both of us should waste time listening to that repurposed *Mr. Rogers* bullshit.”

"You don't want me here," Raylan specified. Tim rolled his eyes. They were doing that, now--communicating. It was a *thing.*

"That's right. I want all that granola-scented insight for myself."
"I'd like to be, though."

Tim drew in a long, slow breath through his nose. He made a face partway between looking like he was taking a shit, and smelling one. The notion of explaining himself--his personal rationale and convictions--felt like that, sometimes. "It's one of those things..."

"Okay," Raylan stopped him right there. He, too, could only swing the communication thing for so long. "You'll let me know if you change your mind."

"Yep," Tim gave his word. "Pick me up after?"

Raylan nodded, knowing a plum offer when he heard one, and accepting it quick.

- 

Tim's trainer would need all the enthusiasm he had, and then some. In two short weeks, Tim had improved greatly. He took to his new limb and soon was no longer throwing his side out, like he had been on the crutches, compensating for what he’d lost with a too-long swing. It still read on Tim's face that something was amiss. The prosthetic proved to be a tedious piece of hardware, for as often as Tim disappeared to the bathroom at home to investigate why he routinely felt pinched or a dull, throbbing ache.

Raylan found himself coming earlier to Tim's appointments so that he could view Tim's progress, measure it against what he did out from under Toby's watch. Tim pushed himself no matter the locale, so it seemed prudent for Raylan to know how to handle things when Tim pushed too far--and fell.

His gaze was neither steady nor watchful for long. A pretty woman cut into his line of sight. She sidled up beside Raylan, arms primly folded across her chest. They started chatting, friendly but polite--Raylan kept himself angled forward, only turning his head slightly to face her. But Raylan's smiles became an easier fixture, and his attention to Tim wavered. And slowly, the woman lowered her arms so that they sat under her breasts.

Raylan was still dressed for work: a blue and red plaid shirt, a burgundy tie, blue jeans. He looked like an eyesore, but Tim found his gaze drawn to him again and again.

A young man doing conditioning squats alongside Tim nodded to where Tim was looking across the room. "Which one is yours?"

Tim smirked, pointed.

“Oh.”

Tim recalled the kid's infantry rank before he could get to his name--Anthony. He didn't look old enough to be darkening these halls, and Tim remembered thinking maybe he was just using the facilities. Seeing him in group therapy, then, put those thoughts quickly to rest. He was a nice kid, quiet. Polite in that southern way mommas impressed upon their sons, where humiliation was a cardinal sin.

In that respect, Anthony was looking to give Tim an excuse he didn't need. He asked, tentative, "Your… friend?"

Tim, on the other hand, was not raised to be polite. "Oh, sure. He sucked my dick and we were instant pals."
The kid snorted. “Gross.” He pointed to near where Raylan was standing. "That’s my dad.”

“Your dad’s got a great rack.”

The kid laughed outright. “The black guy.”

“Well I would never presume.”

They continued to supplement their workout with some covert people-watching. “Your man struck out with that chick.”

Tim eyeballed the pretty blonde taking off, leaving Raylan only in the company of Anthony's father, Curtis. “For obvious reasons, I’d hope.”

From across the room, Raylan and Curtis were making similar small talk. They were bored and lacked any other occupying task, yet neither could wholly commit to this one.

“Ranger, innit he?” Curtis had a strong build under the khaki spring jacket he wore. It was an old favorite, with genuine leather patches twice-replaced at the elbows. His wife suggested an offsetting pale green for the latest repair, and even after a year he still wasn't sure about it.

“Mhm.” Raylan inclined his chin towards the dwindling crowd. Five in the afternoon had a similar look about itself, no matter the location. “You waiting on one?”

“My son.”

Raylan spied the young kid doing some strengthening exercises with Tim. He’d lost both his right arm and leg, the former to the elbow, and latter high at the hip. He was saying something that had Tim grinning at him, wide.

“You serve, too?” Raylan asked.

“Vietnam,” the elderly man confirmed. “Got myself a restaurant, after. Would have hoped he’d gone into that.”

Raylan once saw a grease fire take off a man’s face, and there’s no honor in that, no parade. It wasn’t the most reassuring line, so Raylan kept it to himself.

“You didn’t serve,” Curtis said--not in judgment, only to prove he had a read on Raylan, the lean figure in a cowboy hat who thought he was somehow being inconspicuous while surveying a room full of amputees. “You’re something else.”

“Law enforcement,” Raylan confirmed.

“You don’t look like a cop, neither.”

“Good, ‘cause I ain’t one.”

"Federal?"

"Mhm." Raylan still had his reservations about boasting his status as a Marshal. There was the matter of his previous visits to this place, the veteran he dragged out its double doors in handcuffs. But what weighed even heavier on his mind was the fact that Tim wasn't one, anymore. He took no joy in excluding Tim from his introduction--or worse, thoughtlessly including him only to be corrected, later.
Tim met him at the door ten minutes later.

“You’re pretty quick on that,” Raylan commended.

Tim turned and waved once at Anthony.

“Oh, I’m flyin’ out there.”

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When Tim took off his leg that night, it was the first time Raylan had made the conscious decision to take in the show. He played at it all night, channel surfing, feigning boredom, and ultimately turning in when Tim did.

Then he dropped at pretenses, stood at the door, and watched.

It should have been an intimate act, but Tim was strangely brazen. He saw an appliance and future medical waste. He smelled the synthetic sleeve that fit over his knee, like *that* was the anomaly, here.

“You want a whiff?” Tim asked, his voice deep, rolling with tempered laughter. It was a joke, but given Raylan’s stricken expression, it was not received as such.

Raylan turned and ducked slightly, averting his gaze. He realized he was still wearing his hat, and what a thing that must look like. Raylan took a breath and then a good, long look at Tim.

“It’s not you,” he said firmly. He wanted to avoid the necessary apology, thinking Tim wouldn’t want to hear one.

“Chrome doesn’t clash with anything, Raylan,” Tim said, taking the comment literally.

Raylan ignored the comment and continued, “And it ain’t the leg.”

“Really? It’s the leg, for me.”

Raylan put his Stetson on the dresser and swept a hand through his hair. His long fingers seemed to know where every line of gray hid, and covered them, and for a second Tim saw Raylan as he first had. The new guy, the troublemaker, the local boy with a long history in those dark hills. Tim felt a painful reminder of his initial crush.

There was never a thing Raylan wanted said that alluded him. He'd figure out a way to couch the comment in a smile or a punch in the face. It was, in part, what frustrated Tim and sent him seeking confirmation with that awful declaration of love. That was Raylan's gift: when he held his tongue, it only drove others crazy.

So it was a surprise. Now, to see Raylan fish for words.

“I thought you were… a rock. Unbreakable.” He made a face, threw the look at Tim in apology.

“This don’t change that--”

“Smooth,” Tim commended. He was enjoying this.

“I’m serious.” Raylan looked him in the eye, made sure he knew that seeing Tim come through his ordeal left him a little astonished, but ultimately so proud. Tim wasn’t precious with much—a good taste of bourbon, he’d savor. The soft pages of his favorite novels that Raylan would ruin by dog-earing his place. Willa, for as adamant as he’d front against it. But the incredible shots he made, the
good work he did, and his own self, to some extent—they were learned skills, and he treated them as such. He trained and taught himself to do the things he was most proud of; nothing was a given... Except for the body and mind that allowed him to perform. Certainly, the hurdle of such a catastrophic injury shook Tim’s resolve, but he was quick to attack the job, and make fast work to reclaim his abilities. “Like nothing’s changed.”

It was a compliment, however fumbled. And it worried Tim to hear it.

“That ain’t a good thing, Raylan.” Tim smoothed his hands down both his thighs, hairy and muscular, spilling out from his boxer shorts. Only the one ached, but Tim touched both out of habit. “‘Cause that’s not how it is. I got physio. I can’t drive myself anywhere. I can’t reapply to the Marshal Service, I can’t do shit.”

“For six months,” Raylan intoned. Again, his awe bled through. “Christ, Tim. It’s not an eternity. I’m calling it now, six months and you’ll be doing every damn thing you please.” Then, Raylan found the sentiment he’d long needed to say, if not yet the precise words: “I can handle it. You. I can handle you handling it.”

The moment faded away. Admittedly, it was difficult to wager a tender exchange with a handful of baby wipes and the chemical stink of Neosporin.

Tim wanted to handle this well. He’d known guys who couldn’t, because they wanted too much to be whole. Tim didn’t think he’d ever needed that—or at least, never confused that luxury for a necessity. Being like he was was no longer an option, Tim decided. He was a man who made a lot of mistakes and took a lot of shortcuts. They fell into place along hard work and dedicated training, but were always there for him to return to and indulge in.

He was in a lot of pain, some days. He tried to force it through a funnel, feed the black hole all his focus seemed to drain into. It proved difficult, and some mornings Tim seemed to only awaken so that he could sit up and breathe in failure. He didn’t take Oxy or anything else he was prescribed, beyond another spell of antibiotics that made him sleepy in the afternoons. He was a stickler for the antibiotics, as well as keeping the wound clean, despite its sporting of the same ugly, open sore for weeks. Raylan saw the dressing between Tim’s fleshy sock and the prosthetic come away pulpy-red one evening, and near about had a fit.

“That don’t look right.”

“He finally says it.”

Raylan ignored Tim’s put-upon slight and stepped closer for a better inspection. “The fuck—is it bleeding?”

“Are you questioning the U.S. Army’s craftsmanship?” Tim grinned. “It’s just a sore.” He raised his leg and got a grip on the end, angling it towards Raylan. If that was an effort of Tim’s to prove otherwise, about the bleeding, he’d failed gloriously. “See? ‘Cause there’s bone there and even with the sleeve it rubs on the--well, stop me if you’ve heard this one.”

The familiar line of leg and bone just ended. It looked strange, like cheap sidewalk magic in nice cities. Raylan was surprised to find himself feeling a little disgusted. Tim read it in the thin line of his lips, the hard look in his eye, and the thought that kept his gaze steady: he felt some vague manner of complicity in all this. It was like looking over a body he’d put a bullet through. The gore wasn’t the driving factor, and Raylan had no desire to be party to some imagined thrilling experience, but it demanded confirmation. In Raylan’s case, the taking of a human life. And now—the alteration of one. The massacring of the human form.
He said only, simply, “It looks like it hurts.”

Tim, in feeling a strange surge of sympathy for driving Raylan into the sorry expression he wore, however unintentionally, said, “Like a motherfucker.” No jokes, no illusions to his complete and ready recovery.

“It doesn’t register on your face. At all.”

Tim brandished his prosthetic in the air, his grip tight around where the steel rod doubled for an ankle. "Acting," he said.

“You been taking any of those painkillers?” Raylan asked, his tone hopeful but trying for not. If nothing else, a taste for narcotics would explain Tim's sense of humor.

Tim shook his head.

“I'm worried," he said, sudden and stark against their joking mood.

"About what?"

"What I'm gonna do after I finish this."

The bed creaked under Raylan's weight as he took his place beside Tim. "You're gonna be fine," he said. He didn't know where all these promises were coming from. He wanted to give Tim everything from the last piece of pizza to the rest of his life.

"I know. I'm gonna have to prove it."

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Tim spotted her easily. Amongst a sea of gray sweats and denim, Winona stood out in one of her exquisitely rendered outfits: a snug column of white for a skirt, her blouse the color of a summer sky. A tiny beacon of shining gold looped around her slim neck--a gift from Raylan, something she’d never taken off.

Tim had never been, but he assumed this was how people must have dressed for things like parties in the Hamptons, or Derby.

She’d cut her hair again, and the loose curls brushed her shoulders. Tim was momentarily struck by how easy it must have been for Raylan to love her. Hell--Tim didn’t hold any illusions that Raylan had ever stopped loving her. She was intelligent and strong, beautiful, and… Tim couldn’t commit to his last notion—that she was here, was present, was loyal--because Winona had been known to burn rubber, leaving Raylan high and dry.

Tim had asked Raylan to take him back. He wondered how quick the turnaround might be if Winona asked the very same of Raylan.

Winona smiled, seeing she’d been made.

Fuck, even her smile was tantalizing. Raylan could leave Tim for that smile alone, and Tim wouldn’t even blame him.

Tim was so struck by her presence, he forgot to even question it.

“Winona,” he said, as if he hadn’t already caught her eye, "Everything okay?"
She looked startled, like fielding that particular question was never a part of her contingency plan. "Oh, sorry. Yes. Everything's fine. Raylan thinks his court thing might run long."

“Okay,” Tim said. Raylan had been held up, before. Tim wasn’t so bothered by waiting around the VA that he couldn’t do it just once more.

Winona continued, her smile still brilliant, “I’m here to pick you up.”

Now it was Tim’s turn to be caught off guard. "He could have just called. You didn't have to make the trip..."

Winna started to shake her head fast into Tim’s list of excuses for her. "I wanted to."

Tim nodded, looked around. “Willa not with you?”

“She’s at a playdate. Which is, honestly? Just free babysitting.” The answer came a little too quick. Surely, this was something Winona had prepared for. “I was watching you in there. You look great.”

“It’s coming along,” Tim allowed, because even he had to admit that today had been a good day. The ache he was feeling was warm and familiar--none of the shooting, phantom pains with all the subtlety of a nail through his skull.

“Raylan said you looked cute in your workout gear.” Winona threw an elbow at him, like they joked this way all the time. Like anybody joked this way.

“That’s what I’m here for,” Tim drawled. Quick though he was with a comeback, he didn’t know about this. Raylan wasn’t some boy they’d both dated in high school; Winona had been married to the man, bore his child. And statistically, Tim was an anomaly. But she had a persistent kind of look on her face, and if Tim was certain of anything, it was this: any partner of Raylan had enough steel will to rival the city of Pittsburgh.

“I’m just going to change,” he said, and disappeared into a nearby bathroom while Winona was still nodding. He changed his shirt, which was drenched in enough sweat that Tim would have thought the wearer had run a marathon, not walked up and down a six-step staircase for half an hour. Tim didn’t tell Raylan this, but the stunted progression of his recovery frightened him. How could it be that his body couldn’t comply with something so natural? The movements were there, all muscle memory--never mind the chunk that had been blown away. The prosthetic was remarkably light, too, yet Tim took every inclining step like he was dragging the weight of a dozen cement bricks behind him.

“You want to get lunch?” Winona’s gaze flitted briefly to Tim’s feet, where she noticed he hadn’t changed out of his workout shorts. “Do you mind? I’m starving.”

Tim ran through his options and supposed he couldn’t very well say no. Lunch was part of his and Raylan’s routine, most days. Well, drinks. But sometimes there were peanuts.

He had no such luck with Winona. They ended up at a Mexican food place with a dozen tiny tables bathed in artificial light from four great walls painted in warm shades of yellow and orange. Amidst loud, humming fans the ceiling was a brilliant blue.

“You’re back as a court stenographer, right?” Tim asked after draining his complimentary glass of water. He wasn’t thirsty for much else than the beer he’d ordered. “I mean, I knew that. I just wanted to set a low bar for this conversation.”
Winona grinned wide. “I am, but it’s only temporary. I got my realtor’s license.”

“No shit?” Tim was ashamed to have not known that, then experienced that feeling twofold as he caught himself blaming Raylan first and foremost. Tim hadn’t asked. He covered quickly, saying, “I wouldn’t turn up my nose at a bench with your face on it. Good for you.”

“It’s fun,” Winona admitted, then tossed her hair and leaned over their small table conspiratorially. “And this is horrible, but I kind of know what not to do, after listening to Gary go on about it.”

“Don’t do business with the Mafia,” Tim mused, getting her meaning. “I could have told you that.”

Their drinks arrived and Winona wrapped her red lips around the black straw swinging in her margarita. “Hours are flexible, so I’m spending more time with Willa… Things have been pretty great, actually.” Her comment trailed off into silence. Tim raised his beer dumbly, a weak celebratory gesture Winona didn’t even meet.

Her bright smile suddenly faltered. “Aw, shit. Raylan told me to just be normal but was this ever normal?” She waggled a finger between herself and Tim. “I feel like all we did was get hammered and shit on Raylan.”

Tim’s eyebrows shot up and he waved down a waitress. “Normal it is.”

They ordered a few too many, and paced themselves with interludes of fish tacos and mouthfuls of sticky-sweet cornbread.

They’d moved strictly to a liquid diet when Tim found himself asking, of the time he was away, “Were you and Raylan gonna get back together?”

Winona toyed with the lime from her Corona. “I wasn’t aware he’d been on the market.”

“That never stopped him from shopping.”

Winona set her eyes on him, firm. “He’s sorry about that, you know.”

Tim smiled, shook his head–he didn’t want to be bitter about it, still.

Their waitress swung by while Tim was stuffing his face, and asked Winona if she or her boyfriend want another drink. “Oh, no!” Winona laughed. “Boyfriend? No, he’s family.” She turned her bright smile on Tim. “And I think we’re good?”

Tim swallowed his half-chewed bite. It felt like a fist going down his throat. “Yeah, we’re good.”

Tim, who had long wanted to corner Winona and ask her plainly, He ever cheat on you? decided in that moment he wouldn’t bring up Raylan cheating at so much as cards. Winona wasn’t competition; she was on his side.

Tim went home a little tipsy. He thought he might have heard Raylan thank Winona at the door specifically for that. He wasn’t wrong to; theirs was a nice night of slow blowjobs interrupted with snorts of laughter and Tim’s inability to stop smiling long enough to get anything done.

After they’d finished, they lounged together in bed. Raylan played a country album on Tim’s computer. Tim accused him of irreparable damage to personal property. Raylan played the soundtrack to The Bodyguard, next, making the case that Tim had done more than enough of that,
himself.

They’d happened on something bluesy and slow when Tim asked, “You wanna fuck me Wednesday afternoon?”

“Is that an offer or a hypothetical?”

“It’s a holiday,” Tim corrected. “Bullshit one. VA’s closed. You still gotta work, though.” He stretched out long-ways across the shorter width of the bed, and Raylan angled himself similarly. “But you could come home on your lunch, and fuck me.”

“I’m giving tentative confirmation now, but ask me again when you’re sober.”

Tim waved a hand. “I’ll take your word for it.”

He sat up and leaned forward with a groan. Raylan thought he was going to fall clear off the bed until he realized what Tim was doing. For a second time, it proved quite the sight: a man literally taking himself apart. Raylan said as much, and realized only when the comment registered with Tim that maybe it wasn’t quite the compliment he’d intended.

Tim offered only a pinched-off smile when he asked, “Where you going with this?”

He sounded amused, but it was in that moment that Raylan realized they were done joking around. They had to be; they’d had one spat and this happened. Tim was removing a prosthetic, smiling andshrugging like he held no culpability, like it could have happened to anyone.

*Anyone waltzing through a warzone,* Raylan thought bitterly.

He left the bed and got dressed. It was late, but not so much so that he couldn't consider a night out, himself, maybe track down a couple of bourbons to catch up with Tim. He didn't get any further than the doorway. He stood there, settled his hands on his hips, tipped forward and looked at the scuffed toes of his boots. “We need to talk,” he decided. “We didn’t do that before, and that’s as much my fault as yours.”

Tim only cocked his head, smiled ruefully down at his leg. “You really think something like this is gonna happen twice? Bet I can tell you the odds.”

“What do you think I think, Tim?” Raylan could take a tone when he wanted to, and he raised it now with Tim. He was met with Tim's blank expression, and felt like he was butting up against a hubris equal to his own. “You went halfway around the world. I think you’ll do anything to get away from me.”

Tim gave half of a sideways smile. He'd been waiting for this. “That wasn’t it. It wasn’t you.”

“I don’t think I’m self-aggrandizing much to call bullshit on that one.”

“Fine. It is your fault.” Even said in jest, the words struck them both.

There wasn’t just one truth; there were hundreds that needed unpacking. But Tim knew the one he had to start with. “I was in love with you. I wanted you. But you had everything else, everyone else.”

He wet his lips, missed the taste of Raylan, from earlier, and beer, before that. He took better care to pace himself, give his grievances the kind of long breaths they needed. “You knew I wasn’t seeing anybody on the side, even when I took off. You just liked thinking so to justify all your
bullshit.” Tim smiled wide at the floor, a ludicrous expression. “Christ, and the sorry line you
wanna pull on me right now? About how I should have told you all that? And then what? You’d
parrot it back to me and still be runnin’ around.” When Tim finally looked at Raylan, he wasn’t
smiling anymore. “So, see. It was my own damn fault.”

“How is it all of your answers for my behavior are never in my favor?” He wanted to ask if Tim
even liked him, before reminding himself that wasn’t in question. Tim knew him, and still he liked
him, and still he loved him.

But to be reminded of his failures left Raylan smarting, so he said, “I can’t accept that,” and then--
because why not give the response Tim had fed him?--he asked: “Why not try, why not just ask
me?”

Sorry line or not, Raylan wanted to make his point. Tim's reasonings for not doing something were
just as flawed as those that promoted action. “Raylan, stop dicking around.' Don’t you think I
would if I knew that’s what you wanted?”

“No,” Tim answered, so clear and honest and blunt that Raylan regretted asking. It was out there,
now. The very measure of Tim's doubt in his loyalties. “I think you’d keep dicking around.”

Tim returned his attention to the slow routine of dismantling himself. It at least gave him the
excuse of not looking at Raylan and seeing how being an idiot played for other people. “It was one
of those things… I kind of hoped you’d see to on your own. Because of the whole… living
together, sort of… raising your child… thing. Crazy, right?” Tim made a face as if to ask, Where
do I get these wacky ideas!

Then he drew in a slow breath. Tim was tired of making a joke out of all the things Raylan did. “I
got to tell you to stop lighting fires?”

“So you thought you’d burn me.”

Tim gestured around him from his halved position, indicating the small apartment they shared, the
uneasy quiet they inhabited together. It seemed in this moment Tim’s loss of stature was never
more profound. “Yeah, Raylan. This is all for you.”

“You left me, Tim.”

“I got out ahead.”

“You had a running start.”

“You been sitting on that one long?”

Raylan lifted a hand in apology, then let it fall back down at his side. He’d never been concerned
about offending Tim before.

“You say all this now, but I didn’t know. Honest. And I pride myself on having something of a
read on you.” Raylan leaned against the doorway, looking just how Tim liked: wanting to stay, but
dressed to go. “I liked it, what we had. I never got the feeling you were as into it. You telling me
you loved me before you up and left… that threw me. You say these things and it takes a while for
it to click into place.”

Raylan spied the glass by Tim’s side of the bed was empty. He crossed the room, took it, refilled it
at the bathroom sink, and brought it back. Tim drank half.
With a slow breath that stayed his frustration, Raylan continued: “You say things, then you throw roadblocks in my way. I’m gay, don’t show any interest. I’m upset, I’m disappearing, don’t follow me. I love you, I’m leaving. I fucked up, I deserve to die.” Raylan kept his stare hard, steady on Tim throughout his diatribe. Raylan thought he had Tim convinced of the first three, but that last one was yet to land. “Don’t tell me that’s not what all this was, Tim. You said so yourself--you go back there enough times, bad thing happen.”

“I lifted that from somebody,” Tim said. His voice was unexpectedly tight. “Actually.”

“Mhm. He dead, now?”

“Yyyyep.”

“I’m a goddamn Creery Sister over here.”

Tim was silent for a time. He felt appropriately shamed, but couldn’t figure if Raylan's argument was so strong, or Tim was just sorry for saying the things he did. “Is this all, what--in hindsight?”

“I knew you were the ornery type,” Raylan allowed. “I figured a few things out along the way.”

“Then how could you not know?” It was a quiet plea and, in that sense, unlike anything Raylan had ever heard from Tim.

Raylan supposed the truth stood between them somewhere.

Silently, they negotiated sleeping terms. Raylan broke all the rules and threw an arm over Tim.

He said, “There was a long time I spent missing you. So long, I believe, such to merit despair.” With Raylan’s chin resting over Tim’s shoulder, he was in the perfect position to catch Tim smiling. “Save your chuckles, I’m being goddamn sincere, here.”

But Tim didn’t laugh, or joke, or say anything at all. He’d said his piece, and what was left was Raylan’s.

"Sad and lonely, you said. I was those things too."

Raylan blinked his eyes, tried to make sense of all the white in the dark. He surrendered a few, hazy thoughts to ghosts, but it was only the planes of Tim’s back: hunched shoulders separated by a fine backbone, and smooth muscle spread over all. Beyond him, the bedside clock glowed. It wasn’t even five, yet.

“What are you doing?”

Raylan watched Tim shiver. A wave of movement skirted from the nape of his neck to the break in his ass. “I sweat the bed.”

Raylan threw an arm out for confirmation. His palm hit Tim’s side of the bed like he’d slapped a swimming pool. It felt like Splash Mountain. Raylan swallowed back the dry in his mouth and said, “So take my side.”

Tim was very quiet. He realized their time apart was beneficial for Raylan, perhaps to the degree it was detrimental to Tim. He was jealous of that fact, first, but came slowly to appreciate it.

“You want to shower?” Raylan started to ask, but Tim sank back into bed, flat against the damp
sheets that, he imagined, smelled like all the worst parts of him. Raylan’s hand curled around his shoulder. “It’s almost morning. Take a shower, I’ll wash the sheets.” Raylan gave him a shove. “Don’t bother with the leg, I got you.”

Tim's first instinct was mistrust. These were not words Raylan Givens ought to know, much less possess the capacity to string together. But they sure sounded nice the way he said them.

“Next weekend,” Tim said, his breath hot against the damp pillow, “You wanna go to Louisville?”
Sorry for the delay, guys! Work commitments and an illness in the family have kept me busy. As is always the case when I say I'm about to end something, I am not. This last chapter went long, so I'm splitting it.

The commotion outside the apartment woke Raylan, who’d fallen asleep during a baseball game. He couldn’t count the innings; the damn thing was still going.

Raylan sat up and ran his tongue over the split in his lip. He’d sustained the minor injury earlier that day while disarming a suspect. The fella had barely clipped him in the mouth but then, that afternoon, Tim hadn’t been mindful of it. Now his whole left side of his mouth was swollen and tender.

Outside, Tim was pressed against the door and speaking. He said, “I didn’t--fuck no--that’d be unsanitary. But I could, Rachel. I totally could.”

The door opened to show Rachel and Tim, drooping at her side. She had a hand hooked around his middle, keeping him upright. Tim had thrown his arm easily over one of Rachel’s shoulders. He was perched there like he imagined himself weightless. Rachel was tipped to one side because she knew better.

The smell came next, rolling into the apartment in eye-watering waves. Whatever bar Tim had gone to, he’d just as well brought it back with him--the urinals, first.

Raylan left the couch and met them at the door, then unloaded Tim from Rachel. He knew not to comment on her unexpected arrival, the late hour--any of it. He smiled, was cordial, like all along they’d agreed Tim would go out and get shit-faced and Rachel would bring him in.

With some effort, Raylan deposited Tim on the couch, where Tim landed on the remote and sent the volume skyrocketing. Raylan swore while Tim laughed and enjoyed having Raylan digging around under his ass for the damn thing in plain sight of their colleague.

“Lunatic,” Raylan said, punching the television off manually.

“One fart and it goes right back on,” Tim warned.

Rachel rounded the couch with a glass of water in her hand. In forcing Tim to take it, she all but spilled it on him. He took a hasty, necessary gulp. It seemed to temper the fight in him. He closed his eyes and looked like the tired drunk he was. He looked small.

Rachel led Raylan by the arm into the kitchen. It didn’t afford them much privacy, but considering how little value Tim was capable of adding to the conversation, it seemed reasonable to assume he couldn’t take much away, either. Rachel’s red dress swung at her sides as she walked, each step a declaration, even in heels.

“Is this a regular thing?” Rachel didn’t do subtlety. She didn’t have the time of day to avoid saying the things she wanted said. Normally, Raylan appreciated this. Turned against his own life,
however, it was none too flattering.

“Once more and I'll have filled out my punch card.” Raylan wiped a hand over his face; he was still soft and weary with sleep. “No, Rachel.”

“You don’t seem too concerned,” Rachel argued, not buying his denial.

The third degree was a little much, Raylan thought. “He was out with friends, celebrating. This is the point.”

“You didn’t want to celebrate?” Rachel pressed, one eyebrow raised.

“We did,” Tim hollered from the couch. “Twice.”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Super.”

“Though it depends on your opinion of oral.”

“I’m in favor,” Rachel shot back, no hesitation. She lifted her chin, a gesture Tim couldn’t possibly see from his position in the living room, but one that changed the tone of her voice, added a sharp edge of ferocity. “Drink your water.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Tim slurped loudly. Raylan imagined it as ceremonial bugling for the death of intelligent conversation.

Rachel's phone sounded with a text, and she angled herself away from Raylan to answer it. Suddenly, Raylan felt like he was awoken for no good reason. Whatever everyone needed, they had—a balm, a distraction. Raylan sighed, and very nearly went for the fridge and a beer, but thought better of it. He filled a glass of water for himself and drank in solidarity with Tim.

“He was going to get a ride,” Raylan said to Rachel, whose attention was returned to him. He kept his voice low and conspiratorial.

Rachel didn't return the favor. “No one in that bar was fit to drive, Raylan.”

“And he called you,” Raylan switched gears, threw his tone into lightness and ease. “Shows real initiative. I may just up his allowance, what’d ya think?”

Shaking her head, Rachel corrected him: “He didn’t call. I just happened to be there--on a date.”

Raylan gave Rachel a once-over. Her hair was pulled and plaied into a braid along one side of her head, and she was wearing lipstick—maybe just a shade showier than her casual touch of gloss, but combined with the red dress and heels, she was a verifiable knockout. Naturally, Raylan couldn't help but flirt.

“Well, I was about to say. I hope someone got to enjoy seeing you look this good. Seems a waste, if'n it's just me and Tim.”

“Don’t try me,” Rachel warned, feeling she was being played. Raylan just smiled at her, suggesting otherwise.

"Holy shit," Tim exclaimed loudly. He was bent over himself, hands running down his legs. After a few seconds of panicked confusion, he sat back with a blank look on his face. "Oh, wait. Right."
Raylan met Rachel with the kind of pitying look he’d never give Tim.  
"I think he deserves a little leeway, myself."

Rachel folded her bare arms across her chest. "And who am I to question your judgment."

“Don’t believe anything you’ve heard about me,” Raylan said.  
“I can only disregard my own sense so much, Raylan,” Rachel smirked a little, “Short of gouging out my own eyes.”

Raylan opened the fridge again, got the beer he’d wanted for himself, and offered it to Rachel. She served him a look twice as cold as the brew in his hand, but accepted it all the same.  
"Maybe now ain't the time to ask--"

"When he's ready, his desk is waiting for him."

"Maybe don't phrase it quite like that."

Rachel took a long swig of beer. She didn’t like what she was hearing--instead of breaking down and decoding the jokes Tim had for the most miserable aspects of his life, Raylan took them for gospel truths, and used them like Tim did.

Or maybe that was just something they both had in common: a similar suspicion of any sign of goodwill. Raylan, having grown in the company of criminals, believed there was a catch. Tim, who hadn’t really grown up at all, didn’t believe there were people in the world who traded in sentiment.

"I won't tolerate any of this," Rachel gestured like Tim was really something to look at, "bullshit. Impress that upon him, would you?"

"You can't tell him?" Raylan asked. “Seems to me that’s a… code of conduct-type mention, boss.”

"Raylan," Rachel sighed like she believed Raylan was purposefully misunderstanding her. It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d done so to meet his own end. His split lip spoke to that fact. “Of course we’ve talked. He knows all this from my end. He ain't quite there, himself.”

She took another sip of beer. "He ain't quite anywhere,” she said. That seemed unfair, so Rachel gave a weak smile and feigned interest, asking, “What was he celebrating?”

“He wouldn’t want me to say,” Raylan demurred. Given that Rachel was his superior, however, and was stood in his kitchen with her night spoiled, he didn’t have much choice. “He got one of those left-foot accelerator things installed in his car. And… he got his license.”

Rachel pressed her lips tight, killed the smile before it started. “Children. You’re both children,” she said. “With your dicks in one hand and a drink with the other, driving yourselves in circles.”

“Speaking of,” Raylan said.

“You start to unzip and I’ll put you down.”

Raylan had to smile. It was a new twist on an old favorite, something she’d undoubtedly picked up from him. “We got plans for Louisville tomorrow. Think that’s a wash. You need me to be on call, I’m free.” Raylan swallowed a gulp of water. “Apparently.”
Rachel studied her colleague, sought in every curved line and sculpted angle of his face even the 
barest hint of self-awareness. Her search answered her own question: men this good-looking were 
often in short supply of the stuff. "This isn't unique to him, you know." It was a delicate answer--an 
ice pick for when she'd rather have used a jackhammer. "Maybe you two ought to have a 
conversation."

"The conversation?" Raylan asked, doubtful. There was hope for him, yet.

"A conversation. But dress it up a bit."

Rachel left her beer half-finished on the counter, a ring of red painted across the opening. Raylan 
wiped it off with his thumb as soon as she'd gone, and did not let it go to waste.

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Tim emerged from the bedroom late in the morning. His hair was a mess of half-curls and flattened 
planes, and he wore a look on his face like he could smell the inside of his own mouth. His boxers 
were twisted and his shirt boasted some crusted-over stain down the front. Vomit, maybe, but Tim 
had known worse. Blood, the last time. Not his own, of course.

"Shit," Tim said, a greeting. He quinted at the windows, took in the brightness and the direction of 
light, and quickly realized he'd wildly overslept. "We still going to Louisville?"

Following tales of local scandal, Raylan turned a couple pages and then snapped his newspaper 
back. "Not today, no."

"Things got out of hand," Tim said, agreeing handily with all that went unspoken. Then, he splayed 
out his hands like his apology came neatly arranged on a silver platter, instead of backed by awful 
breath and wrinkled clothes. "Sorry."

"How was it?" Tim looked like he at least had a good story. If not a rendezvous in Louisville, 
Raylan would have that much.

"Fun, I think." Tim leaned against the doorframe while inspecting the highest part of his 
prosthetic; it was loose and there was some puckering of the synthetic sleeve. A hanging offense, if 
he was to believe the use-and-care brochure that came with it. The damn thing numbered 
somewhere between a Harry Potter book and the receipt--the latter winning for length. Tim dug at 
it with his index finger and thumb, continued absently, "Wouldn't feel this bad if it weren't."

"Look at me a second, Tim." Raylan glanced away from his paper just in time to see Tim turn his 
back to him and disappear from view. "Or don't."

Raylan followed Tim into the bathroom, watched him remove his leg. Tim was more careful this 
time, gingerly peeling back the synthetic sock that hugged his thigh and kept the prosthetic snug 
and in place. The leg came away wet with--Raylan didn't know. The squelching sound could be a 
product of anything: pus, sweat, blood. Tim frowned, but didn't wince. His leg was rubbed raw, the 
flesh a strikingly red. It was the telltale hue Raylan knew from belt buckle welts and the burning 
shame of any number of undeserved slaps to the face.

Tim wet a washcloth with the faucet from the bath and proceeded to gently clean himself.

"You can keep tellin' me off," he said. "I'm listening."

There was a steely backbone of calm to everything Tim said. Raylan wanted very much to upset it, 
no matter how scarcely that worked in his favor.
“You got your pants off, but not your leg?”

“It’s funny ‘cause it’s true.” Tim gave the synthetic sleeve a once-over with soap and water, even used the same washcloth as he had for his leg. It was just another part of him, now. "Must have just slipped my mind."

He spoke in the nothingness tone Raylan had come to dread. It was the lasting remnants of Tim's incalculable anger and depression, which had over time come together like a tumorous clump of cells, and evolved its own distinct sound and cadence. Raylan could have sworn that--sometimes--Tim’s voice had its own faint echo.

Tim lifted his t-shirt off over his head, and wriggled out of his boxers. He pulled the small seat he kept collapsed between the toilet and the shower and put it in the center of the bath. With more foresight than his hangover ought to afford him, Tim situated himself in the seat and ran a shower. It was a display of balance and upper body strength Raylan thought he'd never get used to seeing. He figured that went double for Tim.

Raylan left Tim alone for no other reason than, if the conversation had waited this long, it could keep for another ten minutes. He plucked a book from the shelves in the living room, but circled back to the bedroom. It was naturally dark and afforded very little in terms of light to read by, save for a bedside lamp. But here, Raylan could at least follow Tim's slow progress in the shower.

Proximity was one of those carry-over traits from their work relationship, like where they drew the line at consecutive numbers of fastfood meals--Raylan, two; Tim, four--and driving preferences. Raylan liked driving to a place, and Tim would always take the journey back, even if he'd been stuck with the first leg, too.

Whether they were riding desks side-by-side, arguing over who got to nap on the way to Tramble, or backing one another's gunplay, there was a foundation of ideal closeness that became matter-of-fact outside the office, and well beyond. Tim balked at the word companionship, but Raylan was certain the term was apt. It was something Raylan craved, and the very definition of what he and Tim had.

Tim made it from the bath to the bed, his prosthetic under one arm and the other stretched out to guide his angled path against the wall. Raylan didn’t so much as stir; Tim was pragmatic in at least this. He never wanted it, but if he needed the help, he’d speak to it quick. Part of that came from Tim’s learned necessity to case a situation, no matter how small.

The few feet between the bathroom to the bedroom, for instance.

It was a slow effort. Perhaps even more than Tim expected, the hangover had really knocked him back. Still, he made the journey without disturbing the only stitch of clothing he had on: the towel wrapped tight around his waist.

He sat on the bed and sighed. Maybe because he’d realized that, after bypassing the dresser completely, he’d either have to sleep in the nude or in a wet towel. Raylan closed his book. Maybe, but probably not.

“I’ve done the whole… AA thing.” Tim ended his admission with another sigh--silent, but Raylan could see the movement carry across Tim's back.

“Clearly it’s had quite the lasting impression on you.”

A year ago--and some change, to be honest--they’ve have joined in bed and come together
wordlessly. If Tim was in a mood to tease Raylan, he would. More often than not the playful business came after Tim had gorged himself on his partner, lavished him with his tongue and been rewarded for his good work.

Much went unsaid, now, still--but it wasn’t the same.

Raylan hooked an arm around Tim from behind--a second go at what had previously worked so well for him in the courtyard, weeks ago. Tim resisted the pull.

"I didn't like it."

"You're not supposed to."

Finally, Tim drifted backwards and settled his head on Raylan’s chest. Immediately, his damp hair soaked through Raylan’s green henley. Raylan let his hand drift to Tim’s chest, itself returned to its natural, hairy state.

“They said I was powerless and needed to surrender. Hell of a thing to hear, huh? Surrender to the fact that I can't really control it, I mean. They really ought to iron out that line.”

“I think it's fairly clear.”

Tim’s voice reverberated warmly against Raylan’s stomach, and Raylan hated to silence him. But this conversation didn’t require Tim for much of a speaking role--only the obligatory, eventual, yes.

Yes, I have a problem. Yes, I’ll try again.

Unfortunately for Raylan, Tim wasn’t going down easy.

"Imagine being two months out of the military and being told to surrender, Raylan." Tim stopped, realized he’d begun to absently stretch his leg. He relaxed, but pictured the limb atrophying overnight, withering to nothing but bone and loose flesh. He continued his stretching exercises.
"Shit. Maybe I'll give it another shot. I've already fuckin' lost."

Raylan wanted to kiss Tim in that moment, but love after pity was a lost cause.

"You're just in a mood 'cause this hangover is kicking your ass and making commemorative flatware for the occasion." Raylan gave Tim's belly a sharp, playful swat with the flat of his hand. It garnered no response. "But, yeah. Maybe do that."

"Don't let Rachel get you out of sorts," Tim said. Even drunk, he took everything in, sorted it out when his head cleared.

"This ain't her," Raylan said. His tone was firm, and despite his objections, he had Rachel's order in mind. "Maybe it's because I'm always drinking with you, but Christ. Last night wasn't pretty."

Tim's wet hair had gone from warm to cool on Raylan's middle. Such was the lifespan of most of their conversations. Raylan reached for his moment, but came up short.

More accurately, Tim cut him off at the knees.

"Just think if you had to answer for every stupid thing you did."

"I get the feeling I do exactly that," Raylan returned. There were times Tim caught himself feeling bitter and angry about past indiscretions, and more times still when Raylan pointed that out to him.
More often than not, countering hard realities with easy jokes broke the ice, returned them to calmer waters. Still, their path was littered with the serrated edges of genuine hurdles, and their relationship was wrought with pinprick-sized wounds.

"Oh, can I not drink with other people? You've never said." Like its predecessor, the comment Tim again threw in Raylan's path had all the subtlety of a goddamn glacier.

Tired of this--of Tim and his quest for immeasurable goodness--Raylan snapped, "You want to have this argument again, that's fine. Just know it's another in your column."

Tim smiled--a sharp line, sinister and sly. It was caught in the dull light slanting through the window blinds. They wouldn't have this conversation, no, but none other, either. He wouldn't be held answerable to his alcoholism while nursing one hell of a hangover. That was one advantage Raylan didn't earn.

"Do you say this shit specifically because I can't get up and walk away?"

Raylan sat right up--quick like a shot--and made certain Tim saw the exasperated look marring his handsome face. "Yes, Tim. Of course. Same as why I've thrown out every right sock--I would have you look like a damn fool."

Catching Tim playing that angle was usually entailed a playful reward, but not now. Tim was quiet. His head felt like a rock on Raylan’s stomach. The anger was gone, but something far worse had replaced it. He plucked Raylan’s hand from his chest and dropped it onto his own face like he’d rather Raylan smother the life out of him than hear Tim’s apology. The pads of Raylan's fingertips brushed past Tim's lashes, and his warm palm met an unintentional kiss.

"Anthony," Tim said, bringing himself to speak only after picking a spot on the ceiling and settling there, digging in. "Young kid from physio? Killed himself."

"Shit," Raylan breathed. The gesture brought Tim’s head up in a quick jolt, then leveled. "Celebrations were… postponed."

Nothing more needed to be said, and for a time nothing was. Tim continued to stare at the ceiling and Raylan soon joined him.

“Your heart rate jumped a bit, there,” Tim observed, paced, like he was still talking himself into saying so.

Raylan brushed him off. “It didn’t.”

“What worries you,” Tim asked, “That I ain’t surprised, or that you are? Or that you’re realizing now how grossly out of your depth and unprepared you are.”

Although Tim put a kind of confidence at the backs of his words, same as he would with any of those issued in challenge, the sentiment still fell flat. Weighed down with truth, more like.

“Like I said, I can handle--” Raylan threaded his fingers through Tim’s chest hair, gave it a playful tug, “--all this.”

It earned him a small, sad smile. “Well, you’ve got it.”

But the darkened room, Tim’s damp exterior, and the sorry news of a young friend’s passing didn’t allow for flirting. The mood came down like a boot on both of their throats. Raylan held Tim for a
long time--just a hand over his torso, nothing elaborate. Tim threw a hand back in turn, let it slide along Raylan’s thigh. They were linked together with all the strength of a daisy chain, yet for hours they didn’t part.

And Saturday disappeared, drifted right over them like a shadow.

Tim ordered an early dinner from a restaurant, paid extra for delivery, and tipped handsomely after that. It was worth it to eat well but not have to dress for it.

“Is this what we’d be eatin’ in Louisville?” Raylan asked, eyeballing the spread. Fat steaks with a single streak of pink, gobs of mashed potatoes, steaming greens. It was classic American fare, beautifully rendered in its simplicity.

“I couldn’t give a shit,” Tim said. He grabbed a couple forks and knives, and didn’t bother with plates. They’d eat straight from the glossy black containers. He looked Raylan dead-on and finished, “I just like the way you fuck me when we’re out of town.”

Raylan accepted the flatware with an amused grin on his face. "See, and these are the evils your drinking problem have wrought. What a missed opportunity."

"You got me there," Tim drawled, his eyes shining.

They ate their meal against the backdrop of a televised baseball game, where roaring cheers chased fly balls.

Raylan spoke to the matter at hand like he would comment on the weather--that is, he was spacey and none too practiced. The weather was what it was, and rarely worthy of comment, least of all an interesting one. So too was alcohol, its lure and its consumption. Raylan didn’t know how to talk about it like there was cause for alarm.

He started with the basics: they were both prone to overdoing it at times, still. Neither wanted to be the hypocrite, unduly shaming the other. Drinking was simply something they did--together, alone, always to excess. Tim, who had no illusions about his behavior, had spoken to it once, but made the grave mistake of including Raylan. “We put the fun in functional alcoholics,” was the throwaway line, but it struck Raylan like half a barn, uprooted by the elements and thrown square against his chest. “I ain’t that,” had been his sharp reply. He’d added “Asshole,” for good measure, then turned in. Of course, he’d upended his glass, first.

He was more level-headed about it, now.

“We cut back,” he suggested. The scoop of mashed potatoes balanced on his fork was so fluffy and white it could have been a dollop of exquisite cream. It was his last bite, and yet somehow as good as the first.

“Oh we change up our vices,” Tim said, and left his demolished meal for the bedroom. He returned promptly with a goodly sum of mossy-green pot in a plastic sandwich bag that still held the shape of the PB&J it had once housed. A few small sheets of rolling paper were paperclipped to the top of the bag--a verifiable starter kit. Pleased, he explained that he got it from one of the guys in his physiotherapy class.

“Some fella thought to sell pot to a U.S. Marshal?”

“It was a gift and I ain’t a Marshal.”

“That’s sound logic,” Raylan allowed. Tim had him convinced, anyway. And it wasn’t alcohol.
“You know how to roll ‘em?”

“What do you take me for,” Tim said, already bent over the open bag and papers, “Some kind of invalid?”

He made quick work of two tightly-rolled joints, ignoring Raylan's amused noises and color commentary all the while.

"It was a gift from Toby," Tim admitted, waiting until Raylan had lit up before saying so.

"No shit? That Toby's alright. I've always said so."

"It came with an Enya CD."

"Fuck Toby." Raylan wet his lips and took another hit. “What is this paper? Tastes like dirt.”

“Probably recycled. Or hemp. Recycled hemp.”

“Again, fuck Toby."

“What, did you use newsprint back in the day?”

Raylan chuckled warmly but didn’t answer. He was enjoying himself too much. “I think you can get a prescription for this.”

“Narc.”

“No, really. I read something on your health plan.”

“You read my health plan? I ain’t even read my health plan.”

"It is a wonder you're not hobbling along on a nine iron, then.”

Tim smiled, settled in. Raylan's new couch didn't afford much to sink into, but they both made due. The furniture was firm where their bodies and minds went slack. Tim closed his eyes and in doing so, looked jarringly peaceful, like he'd consciously put his own self to sleep.

“It ain’t bad,” Tim assessed. Raylan took in another slow drag in confirmation. He didn't feel the easiness he hoped would overtake him. Not just yet.

“Had better.”

“Loretta’s?” Tim's voice took on a low, warm quality. It was a product of the meticulous way he smoked pot, surely, but Raylan was happy to imagine that--finally--Tim was content, and this was proof.

“It’s important, I believe, to nurture her entrepreneurial spirit.”

“Well nurture some of that shit my way.”

Raylan gave Tim just part of a sidelong look. “Does it help?” he asked, suddenly very aware that he didn't know how Tim was progressing, only that he was.

Tim skirted a hand down his leg, stopped at the knee and drew it back. “Yeah.”

A flicker of tired disappointment crossed Tim’s face, and in catching it Raylan bore witness to that
tiny miracle he’d long forgone: those rare moments where honesty came naturally. From a life of serial and overlapping relationships, it was a thing that never seemed to flower. Only after trudging through time or trials—or years of both—could Raylan see inside another person, and in turn share with him visions of his own true self. Tim—maybe a little out of his mind—did that, now.

“You know it wasn’t even gone?” Tim wet his lips, drew the joint away and stared hard. “Just mangled. I still had it in the helo, I remember that much. Hanging on by threads. Had it after the first surgery, too. Toes were gone, but,” he waved a hand, what are toes to a leg? “The rubber sole of my boot... Had fused to the skin. Bits of metal, the laces. After the first surgery the whole thing started to rot. I could feel it, just a part of me dying.”

Tim didn’t often think—much less talk—about his time in his hospital, and Raylan wondered if hearing about it now wasn’t somehow cheating him of something. But Tim continued, seemingly undeterred: “Then I woke up one day and they’d taken it. Then a little more, a little more. Piece by piece.”

Raylan didn’t even entertain the notion he was capable of imagining such a rude awakening. He appealed, instead, to Tim’s pragmatic nature. “If you’re going to be morbid, Tim, we could just drink all that vodka you’ve got. Don’t ruin pot for yourself.”

Tim chuckled, thought, That ain’t a bad idea. He left the couch to fetch a bottle from the freezer, and had to work to wrench the cap off. He did this and kept on even with a joint hanging precariously from a pinched corner of his mouth. “I used to think, man, what if I started using dope? Or Oxy, or whatever I could get my hands on?”

The cap came off and Tim left it on the kitchen counter. “Then I started thinking, so what if I did?”

It was like a circus act, a display of immeasurable—if superfluous—skill; Tim continued to talk, smoke, and pour. He splashed some of the drink into a U.S. Marshals’ mug previously liberated from the office, and rejoined Raylan in the living room. Tim toasted him, saying, “But, good news for me, I ain’t got the hustle to chase a fix. I’d rather just drink, good, long, and legal.”

At Raylan’s unimpressed look, Tim reminded him: “I didn’t commit to nothing, yet.”

“Hey, that’s my line.”

It was a joke, the kind Tim would make himself on Raylan’s behalf. Cutting and mean, no illusions. Tim recognized that and was ashamed.

"Stop that,” he said, and used the cover of a slow, warm high to drop his head against Raylan’s shoulder. “I don’t want to be around people like me.”

“You’re good people,” Raylan said. He deployed a swift kiss to distract him, then took the mug from Tim and had a swig himself. After, he placed it far on the coffee table ahead of them both. It stood as a tiny beacon, and to reach for it again would prove to be a distinct effort on either man’s part. “I’d know. I surround myself with your types. People who can come through for me.”


"Ah, but which one's which?"

"All you know, Willa could be both. Let's not forget who her daddy is."
Raylan threw an arm over the back of the couch, freeing up some space and inviting Tim to come ever closer. He wasn’t satisfied until he had Tim’s crown under his chin, their shared smoke joining and twisting above their heads. "She’s already got my bowed legs. God wouldn’t curse her with my personality, too."

Tim shook his head thoughtfully. "I wouldn't want to be with a man who thought God was sweet on him. That shit gets weird."

Raylan grinned through a haze of smoke. “Tell me about it.”

Tim sobered and repeated himself, because this much he believed to be true: "You do a lot of good for people."

“Yeah,” Raylan allowed, then wet his lips. “But it’s never first on my list, you know?”

“...No.”

“You’re confused. S’why you’re good people.” Raylan surprised them both and made the long reach for the vodka before Tim did. He thought about the double contact at stake, should he kiss Tim again. “I have my limitations.”

Tim said nothing, and yet the silence was disingenuous.

“You got any advice for me?” Raylan needled. “How to be a better man, that kind of bullshit.”

“I honestly wouldn’t know.”

“How about… how to live with the shit I’ve done.”

Tim didn’t waste a second contemplating what ills Raylan could be referring to--breaking hearts or taking lives--because Raylan had been doing both for years, and was living just fine. He wanted to know Tim’s strategy.


“Numb,” Raylan surmised, and took a hit. "How's that working out for you?" He sounded haughty, and it wasn't just because he had a literal mouthful of hot air. Then he laughed, drew the joint away from his mouth and eyeballed it. “Christ. You made ‘em big.”

“My hands are big,” Tim said, smiling a little. “I made them proportional.”

It occurred to him that Raylan was trying to have A Conversation, and Tim didn’t want that. He smoked in silence until he’d managed to make something with the barest resemblance to of a smoke ring. He wasn’t quite satisfied with the result, but he was dry-mouthed and getting dizzy. He littered Raylan’s path with one-liners, joking first without conviction, “Where are your eyes at, man? You blink right now and they’re gone.”

And Raylan played along for a time, but continued to work toward some honest rendering of a conversation. He made quick work of it, believing that Tim deserved to have it before he got good and loaded, but knowing all the same that time--not to mention history--was not on his side. “I been thinking—”

“Am I crippled?” Tim interrupted. The question was as loud as it was awkwardly posed. "Like, by definition."
“You ain’t crippled, Tim.”

“But am I crippled… at heart.”

Raylan grinned. "You're a fucking monster.”

It wasn’t a smart plan, it seemed, to keep smoking and believe he could only play at being high. His mind started to wander and Tim found himself with more than just jokes on his lips. He reached for the mug and downed what was left of the vodka, and was clear enough yet to know he’d fucked himself.

Tim looked down at his legs, said plainly, "It don't seem like enough, almost. To stop me doing what I want.”

"It ain’t." Raylan was confounded by the very idea. There was nothing stopping Tim; since the minute he got back to Kentucky, he hadn't stopped moving forward, pushing himself, claiming small victories until returned mobility was hard fought and won.

"I don't know about that." Tim spoke with a slow finality. "I want to feel like I could really hurt you. Now I just think you'd forgive me."

Raylan mistook the comment for another joke; Tim's usual brand of black humor, blurred and drawn at the edges. He was grinning when he asked, "How bad do you want to hurt me?"

Tim gave Raylan a long, measured look. "Death," he said, "would be kinder."

The look on Raylan’s face begged for an explanation, though he’d come to very quickly regret hearing one.

“"You break my heart. Every day.” Sincerity wasn't something Tim often deployed from his wheelhouse, and when he tried, it often came stunted and unnatural, like he was following directions deployed at just at his periphery. Now was one of those times. Then Tim laughed, giddy, like only a man who’d bared his soul could. He sucked down more vodka and wished he could swallow his own tongue, too. Raylan’s face--Christ Almighty. It would haunt him.

“I’m sorry,” Raylan said. He meant it. He'd long believed the sentiment, even without its saying. His behavior had hurt Tim immeasurably--and worst of it was, Raylan knew how he felt. It was as though he'd taken all his anger and bruised pride back when Winona left him--the inaugural time--and passed those feelings along to Tim, except it wasn't a clean deployment. Rather than handing off a heavy load, it was like passing along a contagious disease.

Knowing this in his heart and hearing it outright were two vastly different species of animals, however. And to boot, it was Tim saying so, not Winona or Rachel in their own roundabout ways. Tim, who said nothing short of what he meant.

Raylan added thoughtlessly, “You’re a mean sonofabitch.”

“I know,” Tim said, speaking to Raylan's apology. Then, to his insult: “And I know.”

He set the joint just off the corner of a book on the coffee table, got up again, and retrieved the bottle of vodka from the kitchen. He splashed a goodly sum into the mug, gulped it down.

“I want to tell you something,” Tim said. His mood was infused with such lightness that, for a moment, Raylan dismissed the words all together and put his good faith in only the chipper tone. That was not his first grievous mistake of the day, but it ranked high.
“What, all that was just the opening number?”

Tim ignored him and continued, his heavy words contrasting wildly with seemingly everything else about him--his eyes and his smile and the way he moved, unsettled. “Our relationship was falling apart and instead of asking if you wanted to fix it with me, I blamed you and left.” Tim blinked. “Shit, wait. That wasn’t it.”

“Gonna be difficult to strike that from the record,” Raylan remarked, suddenly very well on his way to sober.

Tim drenched his dry mouth with more vodka, swallowed, and started again. “You can sleep with other people.”

“Tim.”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re high.”

“I’m multitasking.” They sat shoulder-to-shoulder, damn near business-like except for the closeness. If Raylan thought Tim wanted him close because what the ideas he was getting at demanded it, he was wrong. Tim just didn’t want to raise his voice over a distance; he didn’t like the things he knew he had to say.

“It ain’t like I think I can’t be cheated on. That I’m so irresistible,” Tim gestured at himself, bottle of vodka in one hand, joint in the other.

“You are,” Raylan promised.

“You’re funny.”

For the true picture of irresistibility, Tim needed to only look upon Raylan, sprawling and languid on the couch, indulging in a fashion he could take or leave, but excelling at it like it was all he’d ever done. His long limbs and powerful grip were something to be experienced, sure, but came expected. His delicate features betrayed every other hard truth about him: he could be ruthless and downright cruel in pursuit of his own particular brand of justice. He was inherently a lie, packaged so nice that there were none who didn't accept him for all that he was, and all that he did.

Tim continued, determined, “I’m just being realistic. This way, it’s more dignified.” He made a face, like he thought the explanation didn’t do his idea justice. Raylan, meanwhile, saw it as shit feeding into more shit.

“That’s how you feel right now? Dignified?”

“Well,” Tim said, a smile on his lips, a line awaiting execution: I ain't so familiar with the feeling. You know anybody we could call to explain it? Then, the notion of his own request struck him as what it really was: surrender. He'd condone what was done, and tacitly accept that it'd happen again and again. The very thought sank his heart. Tim felt like he'd put it into the hands of Robert Durst and watched it be hacked into pieces and strewn about--giddily, and without recourse.

Tim rebuffed his own idea, saying only, “So don’t, then.”

“Roger that.”

Tim looked ahead, thought, Jesus Goddamn Christ, I believe him.
Raylan took advantage of Tim feeling so displaced by his own conclusions to issue murmured promises not to cheat, each overlain by a string of wanting kisses. Tim fell into it, tasted the strange breath in Raylan’s mouth, felt it mix with his own. Raylan was always a warm and easy presence, and when Tim didn’t over-think why that was, he got to enjoy it.

“I got a work story,” Raylan said, his lips still pressed to the corner of Tim's mouth, “To prove it.”

Only Raylan could encounter more than one sexy divorcée on the job in a week. In a day. It was the kind of story Tim expected, and he got nothing less.

Raylan told the tale like he’d read the CliffsNotes for a harlequin novel, finished on an absurd note--And there was Nelson, icing his balls!--and played up the truth just enough to get Tim smiling wide and stupid. His expression turned small as he considered the story, and his place in it, which Raylan had clearly mapped out. Lines like, It was a hell of a shot. A walk in the park for you, but really something to behold for his kid, and You’d have liked him. Triple homicide or no, he was a funny fucker kept Tim invested.

"Sorry I missed it."

“I got another one for ya,” Raylan said. He was enticed not by his own voice, or the pleasure of mastering the attentions of another, but by the look on Tim’s face: soft, pleased. He heard these stories from Raylan and could position himself inside their narrative parameters. And he was always neatly stationed--with Raylan--on the side of good.

Raylan told another ridiculous story from work--a duo of brothers, themselves seemingly harmless morons with criminal records, save for what else they had in their favor: religious delusions, access to guns, and an old Victorian-style family home out in picturesque Versailles. It made for a long afternoon--both for Raylan, and the SWAT team called in to recover his ass. He finished with a mention that he could have used Tim in a fix like that.

"Some company in the cellar?"

"I was lonely," Raylan grinned. If he was ever embarrassed about it, the pot put things in perspective. He very well could have died. With that in mind--certainly, it was a way to spend an afternoon--he asked of Tim, "What do you do all day? Besides physio."

There was a time when Tim would have bristled, shut down at the insinuation that he was taking too long to come to terms with his new reality, or worse still--overcome it entirely. Now, because Raylan’s part in his recovery was no small fixture, Tim knew what he was really after: Is there anything you’re doing you wish I was a part of?

Tim took a thoughtful drag, held it in, then let the smoke part his lips like a warm breath. "Well, I perfected the hand job."

Raylan grinned. "Did you, now?"

"One of my pet projects,” Tim said, and dropped a hand on Raylan’s knee. "You want, I could show you my findings. Fascinating stuff. A breakthrough, really."

"I think you've been scooped. Perfect handjob is a blowjob."

Tim slid his hand up Raylan’s thigh. "Shit, there goes my patent."

Warmth spread over the parts of Raylan Tim had touched. "Any other time, I'd take you up on that kind offer."
"You not feeling it?" Tim was ready to pony up, offer his mouth, but realized that wasn't what Raylan was after. He looked content, doing just this.

"I'm feeling something," Raylan smiled, and drew the joint away from his lips for a much-needed respite. His eyes shined as interest touched every nerve in his body. He sat up, and let it be known. "Let me look at you."

Tim didn't so much as bat an eye, though the way Raylan spoke with that voice of his--a cool drink poured over the burning ground, the impact before the hiss--stirred inside him. "What do you want to see?"

"Stand up," Raylan instructed. "Let me decide."

He kept his tone light and they each played like Raylan wasn't really ordering, and Tim wasn't really into it. Tim stood.

Raylan noted that Tim had put on some of the weight he'd lost. He looked solid, sure in his footing. His shoulders were relaxed but his posture was--forever--ramrod straight. In exchange for the view, Raylan gave Tim his naked attention.

"Turn around," Raylan said after a long moment spent studying Tim's front: his face and arms, the way his t-shirt hugged his shoulders and drew tight across his chest. The ridiculous way he smoked, like he knew he was being watched.

"Take off your shirt," Raylan said, and waited until Tim was dutifully raising the thin t-shirt up above his head before adding, "And your boxers."

"Why I gotta strip, huh?" Tim threw a look at Raylan from over one shoulder. Raylan motioned for him to turn back around, keep facing the wall.

He assured Tim, "My plan will become clear in time."

Good soldier that he was, Tim followed orders. In doing so, he gave Raylan more of a show than he'd anticipated. Raylan saw the scars coloring Tim’s side, the ropey lines that curled around his arm and bit into shoulder. Raylan never made it known to Tim, but he’d always been curious about the burns, and what it felt like to suffer something where the recovery hurt worse than the initial wound. How long, Raylan wanted to ask, did Tim have to stare at gnarled wasteland of flesh? And did the obvious skin grafts come from Tim's own abandoned leg, or had he never thought to ask?

Tim peeled off his boxer shorts, exposing his flesh to the air.

"There’s something about bare ass, huh?"

"There’s something about yours." There was excitement in Raylan’s voice, and it made Tim smile to hear it.

“You’re gonna wish you’d given me a prop or something. I got nothin’ to drop and bend down for."

If not a laugh, Tim was expecting *something* from that line--a huff of amusement, followed by an ugly cough, because it really had been years since Raylan had partaken in this particular vice. Instead, Tim got the wholly unexpected, feather-light touch of Raylan’s fingertips against the curved side of his ass. It’s not especially sexual, given the placement. Rather, it was quiet and strange and somehow fitting.
“You want me to fuck you?” Raylan asked, a genuine curiosity. “Or wait. Until we’re good and far away from here.”

When Tim turned back around, his ready smile had disappeared. He looked upon Raylan so blandly, it was as though he saw nothing there. “Are things ever going to work—with us—right where we are?”

Raylan didn’t respond, in large part because he simply had no answer.

Tim bent, pulled on his boxers and collected his t-shirt. “I ruined it.”

“You didn’t.”

“Then what the fuck did I do?”

Raylan stood and closed in on him, planted slow-moving kisses along his jaw, his neck. A few choice touches could drive Tim to distraction; Raylan had done it before. For someone with resolve like steel and a heart to match, Tim’s affections could be very easily won. It took only some teasing, generosity, and follow through, so that Tim became putty under Raylan’s touch.

Raylan went through the motions like a shopping list, but Tim only gave back the bare minimum. Their exchange came to a quick end.

“Sorry,” Tim gestured with the meager remains of his joint. “This shit doesn’t get me horny.”

Raylan placed one last kiss to the corner of Tim’s mouth—a farewell to the night’s efforts. With a voice not quite the shade of disappointed he felt, Raylan managed to joke, “Finally, a cure.”

Tim wanted to ask, “You gonna step out on me again, if I don’t?”

But that line, and the response he imagined from Raylan—“You want to try me?”—wasn’t something he’d let himself do anymore. He resolved to stop putting words in Raylan’s mouth, laying failures at his feet. Raylan was handsome and charming, whip-smart and whole. All were attributes Tim didn’t see in himself, so even before Raylan’s missteps, Tim was inclined to be wary: that a man with so much would deign himself to a partnership with someone so sorely lacking.

“Should probably stop,” Raylan said, his voice wrung-out and dry from the pot. “Can’t show up to work tomorrow, my eyes pissing holes in the snow.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday,” Tim said, ever the contrarian, though he could not dismiss the look Raylan wished to avoid.

“I’m on call,” Raylan said, and took one final, generous hit. He surveyed Tim with a speculative gaze. It was the wrong time for melancholy, but he wanted this. “I’d still like to fuck you.”

“So kind,” Tim smirked, then razed the hair at the back of his neck with one hand. In his other hand, he still had his gathered t-shirt and joint. He felt silly for having stripped, yet allowed nothing to come of it. “Nah. Tomorrow, if you want.”

“Shouldn’t have passed on that handjob,” Raylan said, his tone wistful.

“Nope, that was stupid.” They were both grinning, now.

Both men felt as though they had returned to an ease in their relationship, last seen so long ago that
neither could quite pinpoint its death amidst all the distrust and turbulent new beginnings. But its resurrection came as a swift reminder that they’d done this before—very successfully and for quite some time.

Tim promised he’d cut back. Raylan said that he’d hold him to it, and asked if Tim needed to hear it again from him, his promise—but Tim cut him off, saying once should be enough.

They said all these things in quiet passing. Raylan was in bed and still undressing, enjoying too much the touch of his own clothes and wishing he could get his hands under Tim’s again. Tim drifted in and out of the conversation as he smoked, unfastened his leg, and drank. Water, this time. He made sure Raylan saw him. In the early night permeated with a fog of their own making, sleep touched them both.

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Plans for Louisville fell into place the following weekend. They left after Raylan got off the clock and Tim finished an afternoon physiotherapy session—not his usual time, but after Anthony, the classes were shuffled. Everyone saw through the staff-led effort to pretend that he’d simply transitioned out of the course, but responses were muted. It was nothing anyone in the facility hadn’t seen before.

It was a cool night and Bardstown Road was littered with people crowding into one restaurant or another. A few brave souls occupied the patio spaces outdoors, and enjoyed faster service for their trouble. It had been a while since Tim had walked on unfamiliar turf, and the broken slabs of sidewalk didn’t ease his endeavor. He tripped exactly once, and grabbed Raylan’s arm to steady himself rather than fall forward on his face.

“Slippery,” Raylan said. It hadn’t rained anywhere in Kentucky for weeks.

“It’s almost as if sidewalks were made for people with legs,” Tim drawled. His was an effort beyond refusing to be fazed by his own limitations; he only acknowledged them tangentially.

Raylan led the way in search of America soul food. They ended up at a joint with a menu bolted to its door, but no listed prices. It seemed about the kind of thing a dinner date ought to be: too expensive, but tantalizingly so. Half the reason for chancing it was the notion of being right all along, grousing that it wasn’t worth it—or better yet, being made to eat one’s own words, and something off the dessert list, too.

Jack Fry’s was home of the $30 pork chop so big it didn’t entirely fit on Tim’s plate.

Over dinner, Raylan smiled too-big over bites of sharp greens and tender steak, flirted shamelessly and in full view of other patrons and the waitstaff. Tim found it wasn’t something he’d been missing, really, so much as it was something they’d genuinely never done.

He liked it.

It was difficult for Tim to determine if this show of force—however dopey and romantic—was an instance of Raylan simply pitying him. He mumbled something to that effect, hating himself for even asking but deeply curious all the same. Without missing a beat, Raylan argued that he respected Tim too much for that.

“But I sympathize,” he began, “With you, for not getting what you wanted out of the two of us.” He gestured with the speared asparagus on the end of his fork, specified, “The first time.”

“Hm. You about to spin a yarn about how some hot thing in the holler spurned your advances?”
“Thought I’d go with that old standby--my adrenaline-junkie of a partner up and left me all brokenhearted.”

Tim must have looked suspect, because Raylan came clean with the truth: “Winona’s been seeing someone.”

“You?” Tim asked, and adverted his eyes to the meat on his plate. “Is how this analogy would work.”

Raylan ignored him. “Someone you love,” he continued, “Finding something--anything--with somebody else… that ain’t half of what you had together. It’s the kind of thing that eats at you.” The restaurant--any restaurant in Kentucky, really--wasn’t the type a man had to remove his hat, but Raylan had. His face appeared more open and honest without it. “I didn’t see myself as doing that to you. I am sorry.”

Tim gave him a narrow-eyed look as if to say, You listening to yourself right now?

But Raylan held strong to his findings, certain there was a lead there worth following. “I know you. You can’t tell me I don’t know you.”

Dinner, as well as what came after, was a leisurely affair.

They walked along Bardstown, past aged homes and landmarks. Rotted French windows hugged every other building, their original white, but turned beige with time. They looked like slabs of butter against the pale pinks and grays of the houses they adorned.

Louisville seemed a lot farther away from where they’d come; it had a grandness and culture to it Raylan never grew up associating with Kentucky. It was just as well that Raylan only ever visited the city sparingly.

Despite the cool night, Raylan got ice cream while Tim scored a coffee--some expensive blend from a local place--and they sat on a bench outside a church.

"That much don't change," Raylan said, staring up at the steepled building. He felt foolish for speaking aloud, now, to his own private thoughts. But Tim nodded, figuring his meaning.

They sat shoulder-to-shoulder on the bench, facing the street. To Tim's far left, shadowed under a growing treeline, was the Second Street bridge.

Raylan kept his attentions closer to home, and did not let his eye wander to the place their partnership had dissolved. That was how he’d come to think of it, anyway--never once believing they’d stopped anything, or ever truly intended to.

Tim wore a gray collared shirt and a blue jacket--just one in his vast collection. This one, Raylan decided, was special. It was a dense wool and had near-indecipherable green and gray exterior stitching over the shoulders so as to fashion faux-raglan sleeves. The detail did not take away from the functionality of the garment, but made Raylan smile, nonetheless. This was as close as Tim would get to breaking from the uniformity of his attire, and donning anything for show. This was his white Stetson.

“You want to head in?” Raylan asked, thinking only that the outfit would look just as good--if not better--on some hotel room floor.

“I do,” Tim agreed, his small smile no less obscene than Raylan’s giant one. He stood up, proposed, “Maybe get a drink on the way?”
“You’ve been doing well,” Raylan said, and hoped he didn’t sound as condescending as the very comment suggested—that he’d been watching Tim, keeping tabs. Because he had been, of course. But he didn’t like it sounding that way.

“I know. It’s killing me.”

Because Raylan wasn’t a miracle worker and Tim didn’t believe in miracles, they went for that drink.

They didn’t scope out the bar selection like they’d done with the restaurant—a drink was a drink wherever they got it. The second they stepped inside the establishment, Raylan would have traded his trigger finger for a shred of foresight.

Calvin, with his familiar dark eyes, greeted them. He recognized Raylan first—smiling wide for him—and then Tim, second, and with no shortage of disappointment.

“Oh, hey.” It was a physical struggle for Calvin to look at Tim while addressing him, like Raylan had some magnetic pull on him. Alternatively, Tim had no trouble eyeballing Calvin. His stare was narrowed and sure, like he was seeing through a gunsight. “You made it back.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. The connection between his departure and Calvin’s knowledge of it was one very short leap. “Hey, I did.”

“Where’d you end up going?” Calvin spoke with the kind of vague curiosity one might deploy in asking after someone else’s vacation. He then turned his bone-white smile on Raylan, and eliminated any doubt Tim might have been clinging to, saying, “We knew it wasn’t Syria. Ruled that one out, ha.”

“Couple of political scientists over here,” Tim said, and thought if Raylan started up with him about drinking right now, Tim would win that argument. *Handily.* Answering personal questions to some asshole your partner fucked—with Tim still well enough in the picture that he got a mention during pillow talk—was surely a rationale for raging, unbridled alcoholism. Tim would have dared Raylan to argue differently.

“So?” Calvin pressed, “Where was it?”

Tim’s eyebrows knitted together in disdain; it had been a long time since he was grilled for gorey details by a civilian. “Afghanistan. And Iraq.”

Calvin turned to Raylan, glee written across his face where all Raylan had was tedium. “Two out of three ain’t bad!”

“Wasn’t great,” Tim drawled.

"Bourbon," Raylan said, finally finding his voice. He gave a tight smile for good measure. "That'll be all."

“Aw,” Calvin said, disappointed.

He lingereded until Raylan was forced to repeat himself: "That'll be all. Really."

While Tim may have been content to remain at the bar, kept in close proximity to tout his winnings just under Calvin's nose, Raylan wouldn't have it. He took his and Tim's drinks the moment they hit the bar. Again, he had to shake off Calvin's attentions—this time, a none-too-subtle drag of his fingertips over Raylan's as he took the glasses. Calvin had the open, stupid face of a savior. He
believed Raylan was suffering for standing by Tim’s side.

“Christ. You are predictable.” Tim plucked his bourbon out of Raylan's grip as they spilled into opposite sides of a booth. He toyed with the glass a moment, then took only a sip; no matter the circumstances, this drink was worth savouring. “Chekhov's bartender. Should have known, the second we met him, somewhere down the line you were gonna fuck him.”

“I told you I’d been with people,” Raylan said. A poor defense, even for the truth. He was less precious with his bourbon than Tim, and promptly downed half.

“I know you did, ‘cause we laughed about a few of ‘em. The guy who came ‘round to the apartment the next day looking for his wedding ring, and he sucked you off like he meant to find it in your pubes.” Tim gestured with his hand like he was physically trying to sift through memories of his and Raylan's past conversations on the matter. “The guy with the teeth.”

“That was the same guy.”

Tim didn't much appreciate Raylan getting smart with him. Not now.

“Don’t remember hearing about the bartender.”

“He didn’t come to mind.”

“He certainly remembered you. And me.” Tim drained the rest of his bourbon. It burned in him and he spit out a comment that caught some of the heat: "Guess I never asked--was I always on your mind when you pulled this shit?"

Raylan didn’t return fire—not immediately. He sat very still and studied Tim from across the table. “Is this going to ruin everything? Again? This one fucking guy, Tim--”

“This one fucking guy right here,” Tim interrupted. He stared at his empty glass, wishing for more.

He glanced up at Raylan. “I mean me.”

The bar was crowded, bodies milling about and crashing joyfully into one another. Raylan knew that dance--and he knew, too, that Tim would give him every out to go join it.

Tim began, “I’m going to say two things. One: I get it. It’s tired as fuck, and I can’t look two ways without running into someone you’ve slept with, but I get it.” He reached across the table and snatched up the back half of Raylan’s drink, downed it for his own. “Two,” Tim had to stop, swallow, and it was unclear if he was having trouble speaking, or if the extra helping of bourbon had overpowered him. “If you don’t want to be with me, don’t be with me.”

“You know that’s not what that was.”

“I know. Just. For future reference.”

“Noted,” Raylan said. There was a rough edge to his voice he couldn’t silence, and it came from a place Raylan wasn’t sure Tim could ever comprehend. No matter his deeds in the interim, Raylan had missed him. “You gonna be suspicious of me, here on out?”

“I was never suspicious,” Tim corrected. “I always knew. The way people look at you? Shit. I’d have to be blind, deaf, and dumb to miss it. Or you’d have to think me for the last one.”

“I suppose I ain’t discrete.”
“Says the man in the cowboy hat, finally,” Tim tried for a smile, but came up short. He drummed his index finger and thumb on the table, and it rang out like a warning to his next comment: “That thing I said?” About loving you? “I wouldn't saying it again. If you cheated. Again.”

Raylan gave a tight nod. "Nor should you."

It was against his nature to beg and plead for favor, though Raylan knew things might have gone differently for him in life if he’d sunk to those depths, once in a while. But he was a man violently loyal to his principles. Justice, chief of all. Fairness was another, and those who crossed the law—or more accurately, him—got what they were due. Loyalty was another, but only to his own cause. It wasn’t so often that Raylan applied those principles in anyone’s favor but his own, and if there were ideals yet uncovered for Tim, neither man knew them.

They left the bar having not paid for their drinks. Raylan supposed Calvin would put it on his tab for next he came around. He was in for a long wait.

The cool outside air was a welcome relief from the stifling atmosphere of the bar. They walked if only to put distance between themselves and Calvin.

“What do you want to do?” It was a question Raylan had stopped asking a long time ago, because it frustrated Tim not to have a ready answer. He chanced it again, now, not because it was the quickest way to get Tim off his case—though, it certainly was that—but because it needed answering. “Work at a range? Teach?”

“And become a complete parody of myself,” Tim said.

“People reinvent themselves all the time, Tim.”

“Am I hearing this right, that your solution is to buy a hat?”

“Maybe a muzzle.”

The joke broke through Tim’s poor mood and he gave the question the breath of hope it deserved. “I want to be a Marshal again.”

Raylan stopped them both in their tracks and responded immediately, “Good. Thank you.”

It was the first emphatic declaration of Tim’s future plans, and therefore deserved more than a passing mention. It earned an audience. Tim didn’t think so, as evidenced by his follow-up: “What for?”

“I liked running down bad guys with you,” Raylan said, his head tilted conspiratorially towards Tim, “Long before I liked fucking you.”

“Whoa, save that kind of sweet-talk for our wedding vows.”

"And," Raylan grinned, "I don't think it’s presumptuous to say... Rachel would hire you back. So, thank you. I need a partner I can count on.”

Tim nodded. He could picture himself working a case with Raylan easier than he could breathe. “But that’s a ways off.”

Is it? Raylan wanted to ask. Tim didn’t have to retake courses at Glynco, just reapply. If it was a matter of him not feeling up to it, just yet, Rachel would understand and Tim’s workload could be limited accordingly. But Raylan decided not to have that particular argument just yet, shrugged and
asked, “What do you want to do in the meantime?”

Tim waited a moment he didn’t need. He’d long harbored an answer for precisely this question.

“Let me watch Willa.” Tim said, the request deceptively simple. “If Winona’s okay with it,” he added, “If you’re okay with it. Let me do that.”

“She’s mostly up in Louisville.” Raylan said, very much not wanting to say no, but knowing Tim had said it, himself: it was Winona’s call.

“Option B,” Tim said, not missing a beat, “You still trying to sell Arlo’s place in Harlan?”

In the time it took for Raylan to realize what it was Tim had offered, he’d heard the entire proposal. “Just a few weeks, ‘til the end of this month, maybe. I’ll fix it up, clear it out. Realtor won’t look at you like a joke no more. Weekends you got Willa, I’ll come back to Lexington. Don't expect it should take too long.”

Raylan was shaking his head well into Tim’s answer. “Why would you want to do that.”

“Because you can’t. Won’t.” Tim shrugged. “What’s it matter? I got the time. I got nothing but time.” Tim pressed his lips shut, reminded himself not to start down that route. He threw his arms out at his sides, exasperated. “You want a note from the group counselor sayin’ it was her idea we take on projects, I can get you one.”

“No, I believe you.” Raylan didn’t bother asking if Tim knew the first thing about home repair; more than confident, he seemed determined. And that was enough. “Thanks, Tim.”

On their walk, they arrived at the Second Street Bridge, same as they had last they were in Louisville, well over a year ago. Tim stalled at the plaque mounted at the mouth of the bridge. Instead of forging ahead, down the same steel length, he turned right.

Poor footing and all, Tim started down the uneasy path towards the riverbank. It was all slick stones and dank-smelling earth, garbage bobbing atop inky black waters. He went as far as he could, then stopped, drew his sleeve under his nose to block the stink. Tim turned and faced Raylan, who was just a few steps behind him.

“I wasn't faithful, either.”

Immediately, Raylan's mind turned to Hill, who Tim still emailed on occasion. He wasn't struck by the admission; he'd sort of hoped for it. Any indiscretion would help even the scales.

"We'd ended things," Raylan said, suddenly finding himself playing the part of the amicable loser. It wasn’t a role his naturally fit, and even just standing there, he seemed to be elbowing out of his own skin.

"No. Between..." Tim waved a hand, uncertain how he could accurately describe the limbo he'd been in--hating Raylan, longing for him, and reconnecting. "In Germany. At the airbase before I flew out to Fort Benning. I was losing my lunch in the handicapped stall and this guy--Hitler youth looking motherfucker--comes in, sucks me off."

A half-smile played awkwardly across Raylan’s face. “Are you serious?”

“I think--yeah, it happened.” Tim was firm in his answer, and had little desire to continue. That was all, and that was everything. But Raylan wanted a story--it was the best way he took bad news, dressed up in something interesting. “It was after that beer. First I’d had in months.”
Tim had been both terrified and hopeful for his own return—and desperate, too, for the imagined normalcy it promised. Being unable to stomach his first beer was something of a genuine letdown. So was falling from his wheelchair onto a bathroom floor, but the beer thing felt personal.

Then there was a man, smiling at him, saying things in a kindly tone, and crudely miming a single, simple question: *Does your dick still work?*

Raylan looked Tim over, still trying to fathom not *if* he was joking, and *why* he would joke about this. Like an ache that rolled through his muscles, Raylan slowly came to realize that this was no joke. It was only the truth, as sad and sorry and ugly as it ever got.

“You don't mind me saying so, you don't seem too broke up about it.”

“No,” Tim agreed. “Cause I knew you wouldn't care.”

“You’re right. I don’t.” Raylan kept firm and added an echo of his own tired defenses: “Because it didn’t mean anything.”

“Exactly,” Tim said, his tone sharp as though—suddenly—they were at odds. Tim looked away, turned his head to see the width of the Ohio River, and turned back just as quick. “Wasn’t even enjoyable.”

And so, right up there with Tim’s shattered, *I love you, you know that?* was a solitary non-admission of regret, commitment, and wanting: *It’s not worth it if it’s not with you.*

Raylan was surprised to find that he didn’t think it such a wild idea.

But a thought was all he had—no grand commitment to pair with them. He threw an arm around Tim, let him shoulder the weight.


Tim smiled, looked away. He felt forgiveness even though Raylan hadn’t saddled him with the blame, and figured that was the only way in which it could be accepted: it wasn’t a necessity.

When Raylan leaned in close, Tim felt the brim of Raylan’s hat brush over his hair. Between that and the arm across his shoulders, Tim felt appropriately drawn-in. Sheltered, even. When the wind picked up a cool streak from the water and blasted icy air against their sides, the proximity felt planned—a bizarre instance of Raylan anticipating Tim’s needs anywhere other than the bedroom or the wrong side of a duel.

“The tragedy with you and me, Tim, is that I get to enjoy hating you. And when you try to hate me, you just end up hating yourself.”

Tim took a step away from the riverbank, and found himself enveloped all the closer in Raylan’s embrace. “Sounds like a win-win for you.”

Raylan’s lips brushed Tim’s ear. “Exactly. A fella like me, getting what he wants? That’s the tragedy.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. The previously mentioned illness in the family was that of a beloved pet, who died earlier this month. It's been a really lonely time without him.

Tim gritted his teeth, held his breath, and wrenched the nail out of his arm. Blood bubbled out as he pressed a sweaty bandana to the wound. He kicked at the floor under him and managed to stand. It was not a graceful effort, but he'd already fucked that premise in making a rookie mistake with a nail gun.

He stepped over the mess he'd made on huge porch: decorative window shutters, freshly painted, some panes in need of replacement. Unknowingly, he tracked paint into the house on the soles of his boots.

Tim peeled back the bandana at the kitchen sink, then rinsed his arm with the slush in his ice chest. The power was finicky in these parts, no matter who Arlo had bribed to keep the place on the grid, unpaid bills be damned. The water in Harlan was another story entirely: it ran freely from the pipes, colored more often than not with streaks of brown and gray. Ever since he learned of the slurry locals used to disappear bodies, Tim figured the runoff drained into the water supply. There was nothing to prove his hypothesis, except that he'd noticed that Raylan never drank the stuff, himself.

Blood from his arm spun in pink spirals down the drain. Tim packed the wound with granulated sugar he found in the pantry, and tied a floral-patterned tea towel around the lot.

The pain made him dizzy. Spilled blood greased his quickening heart rate and Tim found himself wanting for an excuse to call Raylan, get his ass down here.

What good that would accomplish, Tim didn't know. He scooped ice-cold water from his cooler with one hand, spread it over his brow, tasted it on his lips. His next breath came as a shudder, and Tim sank to the tiled kitchen floor, profoundly dismayed.

This was a lot easier to accept of himself when he was younger.

After his panicked breathing and racing heart subsided, Tim was able to stitch together what he was feeling, then become an objective viewer of the picture: the overlooked nailgun. The shock of pain. The ruins of his error embedded in his skin--shrapnel, in its way.

It was a little cliched, he had to admit.

He fisted his hair with both hands and curled forwards, elbows splayed out wide over his split knees. He reached for any explanation as to how he could have been so thoughtless, how could he have not seen---

Tim had asked himself all these questions before. He'd clamored for them in his nightmares and in those slow, waking moments where time went so slowly he could blink and find himself in another place entirely. It was like traveling through dimensions, except Tim had seen it all before. There
was never anything new, nothing to be learned. Those moments were infinitely worse than the nightmares.

Tim had been at the top of his game—not just once, but twice. And he'd never be there again. It was a demoralizing realization, one that should come gradually and with age, cushioned by the boundaries of reality. But he was still young, yet. He was not ready.

And it was that attitude—partially fueled by fear, anger, resentment, and all manner of things decidedly unheroic—that led him to carry on past the broad side of suffering he’d endured. He struggled and worked and failed at the expense of pushing himself until his senses were numbed and taut. He arrived at a place where he did not see a light at the end of a tunnel, and no longer wished to. He pressed onward because he knew what happened when guys like him stopped.

At Raylan’s childhood home, Tim couldn’t separate the job he was doing from the reason he did it. In the Army, it was simple. Situational, even. Tim could discount the choices he’d made on his own and accept that he was a skilled individual in a dangerous place, and the same strange fate befell others just like him.

But there was no excusing himself from the Harlan air in his lungs, or the sunburn on his back, or the ache in his leg. He was complicit in everything he was a part of, now. He and Raylan both.

Tim felt his heart rate jump again—at nothing, just a breeze coming through the kitchen's one great window. Warmth spread through his cheeks and chest, and in his wounded forearm he felt a definitive buzzing. He felt his brow prickle, like the skin there was reacting to months of exposure to the sun in all of four seconds. His tongue felt thick and fat in his mouth, which was now clammy and tasted of plastic tubing.

Tim threw an arm up over his head, caught the corner of the cooler, and pulled. A goodly sum of ice-cold water came down on his head, a rude baptism.

He gasped at the shock of water down his neck and back, then settled into it. There would always be a real solution for the things he imagined were hurting him. Mostly, that solution was to gethammered, but after having given his word to Raylan, Tim had found more creative answers to life's little questions: Are you going crazy? Doesn't it hurt? Want to stop?

Tim pulled himself together, sat up straight. Like the rest of him, his ass was plastered to his underpants, and those to his jeans, and his jeans to the floor. He finally felt a chill, and was relieved.

He went to the porch, dried and warmed himself in the sun, then returned to the nail gun and those fucking hideous shutters.

Three hours later, when Tim's clothes were stiff and the sun was bleeding across the sky, an old Jeep with darkened windows started through the hills. Tim didn't wait around and watch its descent towards the Givens' household; he stepped inside and retrieved his gun. Then he stood at the ready.

Tim only lowered his weapon after the car parked far off in the driveway, and he saw that it was Loretta McCready, and that she was alone.

Loretta recognized him from the day she put a bullet into Mag Bennett’s knee, and let Raylan convince her not to administer another, more fatal shot. She’d seen Tim a number of times since, in tow with the usual jackbooted types tearing through the hills at Raylan’s say-so. But that day at the
Bennett’s place was seared well into her mind, and with it was a vision of Tim: the young sharpshooter in a backwards cap. The very same, she’d learned later, who put a bullet between Doyle Bennet’s eyes as the crooked sheriff stood over Raylan, meaning to do the same. Loretta wondered now if they’d been together then, or just circling one another at arm’s length, closing in on the inevitable.

Loretta had cried that day--mourned both the loss of her father and her chance for revenge--and while the lady Marshal had been the one to talk softly to her and lead her away from the bloodshed, Tim had found her after. They’d counted their dead and Loretta was fearful Raylan was among them. She’d already lost one fool of a father, and just as quickly as he’d swooped in, gone was another protector.

When Tim had approached, Loretta steeled herself. Her flattened gaze first gave the Marshal pause, but he saw into the effort so easily, it was as though she’d purposefully made herself known to him.

“He’s gonna be fine,” he’d told her, and looked like he wanted to ask that of her, but held his tongue.

She’d appreciated his curtailed message to her, then, but understood it now.

She walked, hands deep in the pockets of her oversized coat, to the front porch steps. She squinted up at Tim. “You the boyfriend?”

“I suppose I am.”

Loretta eyed his lowered weapon, unimpressed. “You scared or something?”

“Ain’t you twelve or something? Thought if I ever saw you ‘round here, it’d be tearing up the driveway on a 10-speed.” And decidedly not barrelling through the hills behind tinted windows.

“I’m sixteen.” More than the poor estimation of her age, Loretta was annoyed that Tim would presume she wasn’t driving at twelve, too.

She stood ahead of him, a plaid shirt spilling over the waist of her jeans, a buttery-brown leather satchel swung across her torso and hanging heavy at her side. Her long brown hair was split down the middle. Maybe she ran a comb through it most days, but maybe not. She looked like any other disaffected teen might, save for the sharp gleam in her eye, a spark of wit and intelligence and know-how. Most kids growing up nowadays in these hollers saw above the hills and beyond, conjuring up their far-off and ultimately fictional lives; Loretta was more high-minded, looked right through the hills and saw her fortune.

Tim disappeared his personal sidearm down the waist of his jeans. “Well now that you mention it, you are the very image of a respectable young lady.”

“Raylan said you were weird.” Loretta looked over Tim's shoulder at the house, and wondered if she thought it looked nice because she’d grown up knowing Arlo Givens had money, or because it genuinely was the handsome picture of a home.

"Hope he doesn't come to you with boyfriend troubles," Tim remarked.

"I think I provide some much-needed perspective and guidance."

“Lord I hope not.” Tim glanced back at the house, too. “He’s not here, by the way.”

“Yeah,” Loretta craned her neck to better take-in the grand old house. Really seeing it now, she had
no doubt: by Harlan standards, it was a castle. “He hates this place.” Loretta settled her attention back on Tim, stared at the bloodied tea towel knotted around his forearm. “What’s that?”

“It’s code. Probably.”

“Probably code,” Loretta echoed, a smirk playing on her lips. “Was there a ceremony when you were named king of the queers?”

Tim wasn’t going to go to any lengths to defend his lie, so he let Loretta have that one. He looked at her, curious. “You in some kind of trouble?” he asked, knowing well enough that the types of people Raylan got along with best often were every variation of trouble--in it, looking for it, in the business of it.

“No sir, I’m great.” Loretta took three big steps and greeted Tim with a gift wrenched from her coat pocket: an absurd amount of pot, neatly rolled into fat joints. “How about yourself?”

In Afghanistan, Tim learned plenty about weed. How thick it grew, so dense that Taliban fighters hid inside fields of the stuff and sometimes poked out the muzzle of an AK, emptied a mag at American forces. And when the higher-ups had the fine idea to burn the crop where it stood tall like corn stalks, Tim knew how the smoke and acute stink combined to assault the nostrils and sear the eyes.

This wasn’t that, but it wasn’t just two joints in a sandwich bag, neither. Just the weight of the gift felt suspect in Tim’s hand; there was an actual bulk to it. He looked sidelong at Loretta, and figured she had the wrong idea. “Did Raylan tell you I was dying?”

Rolling her eyes, Loretta took the bag from him, showed him that there were actually two distinct little bundles. “Some for you, and some for your buddies at the VA.” At Tim’s blank look, Loretta explained: “I’ve got to diversify my clientele. You think I want to sell pot to a bunch of potheads? The hell kind of business plan is that?”

Tim pursed his lips, tried not to smile. It wouldn’t do to make light of a minor’s criminal enterprising. “Raylan give you the impression that this is what I do now?”

“Raylan said you were between jobs.”

“And you just assumed I’d be up for pushing your product?”

“Half of it’s yours.”

Loretta made a convincing argument, and Tim gave up on the notion that he was meant to take higher ground on the matter. There was no star on his belt, just an ache driving down the shredded bones of his leg.

“Well, okay.” Tim figured he could gift the lot to Toby, who would pass along favors as deserved, and follow-up with Loretta on his own terms. Again, he tested its weight in his hand. It was some natural power of Loretta’s, then, that he felt her eyes on him, testing. She knew an addict when she saw one, even before a vision of him fondling her product.

Pointedly, Tim took the bundle and placed it on the corner post at the porch steps. It was nowhere he still couldn’t get at it quick, but the gesture stood on its own. “Thanks.”

Loretta turned towards her truck, but hesitated. Her long hair caught on a breeze, and Tim’s view of her face was obscured.
“Can I see it?” She didn't so much as claw at her hair; small trifles couldn't draw her focus away from what was ahead of her.

Tim glanced at his prize, suspect. “Price of admission?”

Loretta was too bold to be made to feel humbled. By her logic, it was a reasonable request, and a healthy sum of goodwill had just passed hands. Truth was, she'd seen worse. Limbs lost in grizzly, drunken accidents, or surrendered for the sake of maintaining a business relationship. Brutal, medieval doings. She hadn't seen so much as this, though--a man mending himself because he saw worth in the effort, not just necessity.

And honestly, Tim just had to smile. He'd pulled his weapon on a sixteen-year-old girl, and she'd given him a hefty bag's worth of pot. Where else could he imagine their conversation going if not his life-altering disfigurement?

“You know, you’re the first person to ask me. What the hell.”

He stooped to roll up his pants leg, but found the task ill-conceived. This wasn't a convent; the girl wasn't after a glimpse of steel ankle. He stood, rested his hands at his belt, and awaited some signal from Loretta, either way. He knew her past--as much as Raylan would share, anyway. She shrugged. There was a switchblade in her back pocket, on hand for when men stepped out of line.

Tim lowered his pants to show Loretta the end of his leg, and the prosthetic that finished the job. His boxer shorts limited any unnecessary exposure, but neither Tim nor Loretta was particularly shy. Curious, Loretta stepped closer for a better look.

Her eyes traveled up and down the hairy thigh and its sleek, black company. With a dull stare set upon the fact, Loretta was decidedly unimpressed.

"What with those impressions Raylan gives," she started, throwing Tim's words back at him, "I was expecting RoboCop."

Tim looked down at himself, too. It wasn’t quite that, but nor was it the horrorshow he’d made it out to be. It was just a limb, as familiar to its partner as it was different. "Hey, me too."

Loretta stuffed her hands into her jacket pockets, looked away. It was like things between her and the man who’d dropped his pants suddenly got personal. "Thanks for the show."

"Thanks for the felony," Tim nodded towards the pot, then at his slackened pants. “And the misdemeanor.”

She parted with a smile too knowing for all her young years.

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It was Raylan, perhaps more so than Tim, who was shocked to learn how necessary he was.

Actually, genuinely necessary. Not in the way he could be wanted for a night or a weekend, so entirely that it blocked all else out. Reason and thought fell by the wayside when Raylan felt wanted.

More complicated still, it was Raylan’s support Tim needed, as evidenced by the lengths Tim was willing to go to maintain it: returning to his wheelchair after finding success with the crutches, for one. Not wearing himself raw with the prosthetic. Taking time. Pacing himself. It wasn’t a thing either man could do for their own good--it had to be imposed upon them.
For his part, it drove Tim to distraction: the realization that the increased awareness from Raylan on his behalf—what he'd long wanted—was now in full force, and used to micromanage Tim's own expectations.

But it was a positive development. The lack of sores adorning Tim’s leg spoke to that. And it was a greater gift than either had realized at the time, though Raylan saw it now: a physical marker for how far they’d come.

Tim had fixed it for him—the house.

Raylan knew as much without even having stepped into the place. He’d been by a handful of times in the past few weeks, saw the house gutted and cleaned, gave Tim shit for going up onto the roof before remembering Tim knew his way around one fairly well, whatever the circumstance.

Presently, the windows were open and Tim had probably heard him approach. He stepped out onto the porch as Raylan parked in the driveway. Tim’s gray t-shirt was heavy with sweat and speckled with paint. Eggshell or beige, some color Tim was told by the realtor was inoffensive—not a word Tim would have thought the great, red-faced man knew. A streak of it carried down his forearm, too. His jeans were the same dusty pair Raylan had seen him in on his last three visits—looser down the leg than Tim preferred (or, indeed, that Raylan preferred on Tim), but a necessary allowance for his prosthetic.

Noticeably, Tim wore heavy work gloves and a stained-red bandana over his nose and mouth, knotted at the base of his skull. He tugged the latter slack when Raylan stepped out of his Lincoln, waved to him.

Most noticeably, the strong arms that pulled from the short sleeves were tanned and thick. Unlike with women, Raylan didn't always know what he wanted in a man, and sometimes it surprised him.

“Hey,” Tim said, halfway to a question.

“Hey.” Raylan was smiling. He had a crack in mind about how Tim liked to give him shit for wearing what amounted to a costume—and yet here he stood, looking like the handyman cast in any ‘90s gay porn picture. “Thought I’d drive you back tonight. Calhoun gave me a call, said he had a couple interested parties liked what they saw, pawed at their checkbooks.”

The way Raylan was talking, the place might as well have already been sold.

Tim looked from Raylan on the lawn to back at the house. “I’m not finished yet.”

Raylan lifted the greasy paper bag in his hand--the final, winning word of his argument. “I brought dinner.”

“Guess I can take a break,” Tim said, then peeled off his heavy gloves and spread his arms wide. “Give us a hug, huh?”

Raylan didn’t fall for Tim’s ploy. It was a bizarre passion: Tim would never tire of extending to Raylan a seemingly inconspicuous hand only to have it covered in all manner of muck. For a sense of humor so dark it might as well have been cultivated in a grave, Tim was a sucker for the classic gross-out gag. Raylan couldn’t count the number of times he’d heard, *Smell this. It’s rotten, right?* And that old standby, usually deployed in bed amidst that heady half-hour after sex: *Look at this fucking scab.*

To his credit, Raylan kept his distance. He could smell on Tim the wet stink his partner wanted so desperately to stain onto clean clothes, and approached with due caution. “It’s like you battered and
deep-fried yourself in sweat.”

Raylan didn’t get further than the porch. He appreciated Tim’s work, but didn’t want to take any needless steps back into that house. A coat of paint couldn’t cover what all had happened, there. And there was no grand tour offered on Tim’s behalf, because Raylan knew he understood it, too. It was right there, fed fat into the offer to fix the place up at all.

He surveyed the porch. It was littered with a number of black garbage bags, bulky and filled with pillows and linens from the upstairs bedrooms. Raylan sat on the middle steps, unloaded burgers and fries and a pile of napkins from the bag. Tim had the radio playing loud in the house, and the sleepy, bluesy tunes drifted out to meet him. Raylan sure hated his childhood home, but he had nothing against this porch.

“You missed it,” Tim announced, returning from the kitchen with two cans of Coke. “A real midwestern storm.”

Just that morning there had been a wealth of sideways rain, coming down hard from low, dark cloud cover. It had carried on from the night before, a constant drumming on the earth. Tim had watched it from the window, and then the porch when his interest in the sheer consistency of the act overcame his desire for it to end. From there, he’d lost hours to just staring at the phenomenon; rain as a permanent fixture was a sight to behold. Terrifying, beautiful, still warm in the air half a day later. Even now, as the ground struggled to drink in all that it was given, the sky remained a flat, gray color.

“There’s another one coming,” Raylan said as he unwrapped his burger from a square of crinkled paper. “Was in my rearview mirror the whole drive down. It’ll be here, soon enough.”

Tim stilled in his movements. Raylan wasn’t just making idle conversation; he never did that. Tim unfurled one long index finger from where it was wrapped tight around an icy can of soda, pointed down the road. “You want to go?”

His hands full of burger, Raylan gestured like he really hadn’t been considering asking that, himself. “We can eat.”

Tim let Raylan keep his pride, took the burger.

They ate quickly—Tim because he was starving, and Raylan, despite what he’d said, because he was eager to leave his childhood home behind.

Tim ate his fries one at a time. It drove Raylan crazy.

“What’s that?” Raylan nodded to Tim’s self-treated injury. The wound was healing on its own, but the view left something to be desired, so Tim kept it under wraps.

Today’s tea towel was an off-white number adorned with a pink rosebud design, and the quintessential bloodstains. The corners each had a pastel-colored tassel, and Tim gave them a shake. “I can’t doll myself up for ya?”

“Course you can. Anytime.” Raylan’s smooth response was a direct line to Tim’s dick. Even before his injury, Raylan’s appreciation for his partner’s physical attributes always came as a quiet thrill for Tim, two returned the favor tenfold in bed. Tim was under no illusions that Raylan wasn’t completely aware of this, or wasn’t pulling that string accordingly.

In the same warm drawl that could both captivate and terrify his listeners, Raylan continued, “What I’m asking is, what’s with the bloodstained family heirloom?”
Tim came up short with his excuse: “Would you believe me if I said I found it like this?”

“Yes,” Raylan answered at once. Bloodstained anything was a common occurrence in this house. “But now that you’ve stalled, I know you didn’t.”

Dutifully, Tim untied the towel and showed Raylan his injury. The puncture wound was now joined by an ugly purple-green bruise.

“Christ, Tim.” Raylan took that fact that Tim didn’t shove the scene under his nose as a bad sign. “You want to get that checked, maybe?”

“Thought I’d give it a day,” Tim said, and gently prodded at his flesh for numbness or sharp pains. It was healing fine—he knew that—and his propensity for checking only served to deepen the bruising. That’s what you’re looking at, Tim wanted to say. My chickenshit paranoia.

Tim smoothed a gentler hand over the wound. “Four days ago, I thought that.”

“You haven’t changed the dressing in four days?”

“No, I’ve ruined a few of these.” Tim re-knotted the tea towel. He found the constant pressure comforting. “I near about went to that clinic nearby. But the demons in my fever dream told me not to, said to sacrifice a pig instead.” Because Raylan sometimes didn't appreciate his humor, Tim clarified: “It’s nothing.”

“Mm-hmm.”

And then, though he hadn't meant to, Tim blurted out the truth. ”I wanted to call you,” he said, suddenly mounting a defense better suited for something big—the loss of a limb, or thereabouts. Such was where Tim had last deployed it, anyway.

Raylan was slow to respond, his mind touched by the same realization Tim was stumbling over, now.

"You should, next time." He spoke quietly, and was aware that they were no longer having an argument, but making a pact. "If for no other reason than you want me to touch it."

A thread of sadness traced throughout Raylan's voice, strangled it towards the end. Tim didn't think it was for him.

“Shit.” Tim rubbed a thumb along one of the heavier stains left on the linen towel. He looked at the faded design underneath: visions of spring amidst flowers and precious bluebirds. “I didn’t think,” Tim admitted, angry with himself. He glanced at Raylan worryingly. “Is this your mom’s?”

The slow smile Raylan sported hit his brow first, smoothing it. Then it played with his lips until they parted and Raylan said, cool as ever, “Tim, I can genuinely say I’m not tore up over a ruined tea towel.”

Tim waited a beat, tried to decipher if Raylan was just being kind. Raylan saw the silence for what it was, and expanded on it: despite all his claims to the contrary, Tim didn't want to hurt him.

Raylan met Tim with a look of unabashed adoration. It was a cruel thing to do to such a self-contained individual, but Raylan enjoyed tormenting Tim in this way. "Ain't you sweet."

Tim wanted very much to dissuade Raylan of that particularly damaging illusion, so he put on a wry tone and started giving him shit: “Yeah, but is the towel symbolism—”
"Like, really. I'm touched."

"--A metaphor, maybe?"

Raylan’s gaze softened when he noticed the old flannel shirt draped over the porch railing. It had belonged to Raylan, some decades back. It had once been a dark blue-on-black pattern, but years had stripped the vibrancy from the material and it was all-together gray and drab. On Tim, Raylan imagined it’d be long in the arms and tight across the chest. It was warm out now, and Tim had likely only worn it that morning, rising like he usually did when the pale shreds of the moon still hung in the sky, and well before the sun. He followed the spread of the porch, looked around at the fresh coats of paint that colored the shutters, door frames, and house itself. The crack in the door, even--the one that Arlo had put there, slamming Raylan against it--was gone. The whole door was new.

"Looks good," Raylan said. It was a strange thing to hear himself saying about this place, but it stood as an objective fact.

"Could give you a tour," Tim offered. For the three weeks' time he’d put into it, there was a lot more to see than just the outside. He was particularly proud of the fireplace.

Raylan was slow to shake his head in refusal. "I trust you."

Tim allowed it; he wasn't expecting anything more.

"Loretta stopped by, but I'm guessing you already knew that."

"She give you my message?"

"A big-ass bag of weed. Real subtle." Tim hadn't touched the stuff, yet. He hoped it was the kind of thing he and Raylan could do together again, sometime. "Met the buyers, too. Nice people. Have no fucking clue what they're in for, here." Tim searched the take-out bag for any straggling French fries. "Figure Calhoun must've shown the wife your picture. She seemed real sorry it wasn't you greeting her at the door."

"There’s no accounting for taste," Raylan said, then watched Tim smile in that ridiculous way he did--showing no teeth and with the gesture hardly breaking into his cheeks. Just the barest parting of his lips. Raylan always imagined Tim was a second away from saying, “that’s funny,” when he smiled.

Tim stared out over the property, took in the spread of wild and overgrown acres that had long gone untended.

“So Arlo was losing it, huh?"

“Excuse me?”

“His mind," Tim waved a hand. “I counted no less than eleven bags of Bugles, stacked high as my chest in the pantry. Those chips shaped like dog shit?"

“I know what Bugles are, Tim."

“The choice brand of the mentally infirm.”

“Shut the fuck up, would you?” While not particularly inventive, the reply struck a chord. Raylan never spoke in his father's defense, but Tim wasn't certain this was that.
“What,” Tim pressed, his curiosity winning out over good sense. Tim had no doubt that Raylan did hate him—profoundly and vehemently and still, even in death. But that wasn’t the whole of it, else Arlo’s house wouldn’t still be in the picture well after he’d gone.

Tim supposed Raylan was concerned with whatever else of Arlo’s fate would deign to have thrust upon him. Unwanted property under a cursed family name was one thing, genetic predispositions were another. Knowing something about that himself, Tim knew not to plead ignorance; a son would succumb to his father’s illness as surely as though it were always ever his own. But Raylan had a good while yet to live in denial.

"You ain't like him." Tim moved a sure hand to the nape of Raylan's neck, drew his thumb soothingly over Raylan's perpetually too-long hair. "You ain't entirely like him. I mean, sure. You're tall. You ain't gonna age well. And you're an asshole by design."

Raylan smirked, pleased that's all Tim was willing to believe Raylan got from his father, his angry nature kindly excluded. “What do you mean I won't age well?”

Tim made a face, and was completely unwilling to even entertain the premise of the joke. “Please. Arlo looked like a box turtle made a pact with the devil.”

The smile he earned out of Raylan on that one, Tim thought, stayed on his face entirely too long.

“Want to hear something verifiably insane?” Raylan asked and, his lips still twisted, started in without confirmation from Tim. “While you were gone I came down here, thinking this,” he threw his head back slightly towards the house, indicating Tim's repairs, “was the sort of thing I'd do myself. Yeah, not so.”

Raylan was quiet and Tim wondered if that was it. He was going to ask if Raylan's lack of skills as a handyman really merited the title of insane when, finally, the smile slid from Raylan’s face, and all markers of joy--past, present, future--followed after it. Like a wave came upon him and stripped it all away by sheer, physical force.

Raylan said, "There's a shack out in those hills where Arlo'd go sometimes. Growing up, I figured... Christ. I thought he was killing people, trafficking girls, or some awful shit. I never looked, never followed him there. I was terrified." Raylan’s expression seemed to fall under a shadow, though his hat was still where it laid, discarded, on the porch. "There was nothing in there. Some magazines, an ashtray."

"What's crazy about that?” So the man didn't shit where he ate--Tim knew Raylan had no illusions about his father's criminal record, much less any of the shit he managed to keep off the books.

"I wanted to find them--corpses, skeletons. Girls' bloody panties. Stacks of Nazi gold. The collars of every neighbor kid's lost dog, nationwide. I was disappointed."

Tim supposed he should have guessed that all Raylan’s dismissive talk of Arlo was just that--talk. Here, Raylan was trying to apply how Arlo made him feel to what he was, and in reality, Arlo was a petty criminal and a lowlife, at best. What Raylan wanted--what he needed--to believe was that he couldn’t have been bullied and frightened by anything less than a heinous monster.

Tim didn’t want to get condescending about it, but the point had greater validity now than ever: “Maybe you got the worst of it.”

Raylan shook his head slowly. It was as though he was still there, trapped in the dark, stale air of the shack. "It was like finding out there’s no god, but there sure as shit is a devil."
Tim was quiet for a moment before asking, his tone entirely conversational, "You want to burn it down?"

Raylan leaned into him, thankful for a kindred spirit in such matters of undesired lineage. Tim’s solution was simpler than Raylan’s, who wanted to dismantle the very institution.

He said glumly, "It’s cement," and didn't need to add, I tried.

Tim moved his hand to make a place for his lips. He kissed Raylan and imagined he tasted soap and the stale smell of office coffee. But Raylan wasn’t one thing for too long, ever. He tasted like he’d had the windows down for the drive, listened to the classic rock station until it cracked, broke into country, then faded inevitably into bluegrass.

With his lips pressed to the shell of Raylan’s ear, Tim murmured, “If we go inside, could fool around some.”

“Mm. You too good for an open-air blowjob?”

“Ah, you’re right. I’ve given plenty.”

“You know, I struggle to recall--”

"Before your time," Tim grinned, then circled around Raylan so that he was facing him, and dropped a hand to his belt in suggestion. “It'll do wonders for the property value,” Tim assured him. “Kind of like a murder.”

“This place has more than one of those.”

“Probably lacking in queer blowjobs, though.”

“Oh, sorely so.”

“Well then come on, Marshal. Spread 'em.”

Raylan leaned back and found one of the bedspreads, pulled it from a garbage bag and wedged it under himself and Tim. Tim got a knee down on a lower step, then practically rutted under Raylan to get one of the Marshal’s legs onto his shoulder. The heel of Raylan’s boot scraped down Tim’s back as neither made any niceties about the act.

Tim took his time, drew the task out along a luridly easy pace. He didn't let Raylan busy himself with anything of Tim’s; he got only fistfuls of comforter, a bottom lip chewed raw, his focus lost to dizzying anticipation.

On the steps to his childhood home, his head arched back so that he saw sky and house in equal measure, Raylan decided he’d never had so nice a view of the place. His hat tipped off his head and tumbled down a step, but Raylan paid it no mind.

He pumped into Tim’s mouth, aggravated that Tim was taking his time. Tim responded by shouldering more of Raylan’s weight, therefore giving Raylan less of it to throw around.

No, Tim seemed to be saying, What you want? Ain’t what we’re doing.

Finally, with Raylan’s dick well-swallowed and Tim’s thumb brushing mischievously at his hole, Tim brought him to completion. Raylan came hard and sunk back, like Tim had cut the power to all the nerves in his body, and nothing was alive in Raylan save for his thudding heart. Raylan
stretched out in blissful pleasure on the steps, and laughed with the first breath he took.

“Put it on the property listing,” he crowed. “One hell of a blowjob happened here.”

Good head was something else. Tim never failed to remind him of that fact, every time. He was a connoisseur of cock--his words, gladly spoken.

(Raylan once sought confirmation: “How’s mine fare?”

Tim answered so that Raylan would never ask again: “Oh, more than fair.”

Dick.)

Raylan lifted his head. It was a chore; his limbs left loose and waterlogged. But he managed to become just level enough to see that Tim had worked open the fly of his jeans, and was stroking himself. He did this while staring intently at Raylan, who he’d set adrift on some aimless current of completeness and ease.

"Let me," Raylan said, a hand drawn to Tim's hip.

"I'm good," Tim insisted, his hand working rigorously to harden his own cock, but receiving little in return. "Nn... Shit."

"This limp spaghetti dick," Raylan griped, not so quickly accepting defeat. He replaced Tim's hand with his own, and kissed him firm on the mouth to stifle any word of opposition. Like in many things, Tim was of a mind to do it himself. Raylan could not accept any rule that might deny pleasure. They broke apart only for Raylan to issue the kind of playful taunt that usually got his partner appropriately riled up. "It's like you ain't a man, much less a queer. I rebuke thee."

Tim bit the interior flesh of his lip, in total agony at Raylan's expert touch. "If you're gonna start casting out demons, I got a few others you could start with."

"Oh," Raylan's voice perked, and he had reason to be pleased. Tim's cock was pressing back against his hand. "Look at that."

"Well, shit," Tim said, but was grinning. "Don't just look at it."

Raylan let go of Tim's dick just so he could slap his ass. Then, he took the opportunity to rid Tim of his sweaty shirt. He practically had to press his nose into it, first--Tim’s plan all along--but one awful whiff was more than worth it when Raylan got hold of the thing and was able to fling it out into the damp yard like the rotted carcass of a small animal. Raylan explored Tim’s stomach and sides, both smooth and scarred. Raylan wanted to make Tim aware that a diet of black coffee and powerbars did exorbitantly good things for his physique, but did Tim one better than a compliment--he made an offer.

"Go on, get up. I'm already down here."

Tim grinned wider, had to throw an arm out to the porch railing to balance himself. He stood before Raylan, a few steps lower, shirtless, with his jeans twisted just below his ass and his cock bobbing up towards his belly. "It's the sweet talk that gets me. Every time."

Raylan went down on Tim like a champion. Above him, Tim spoke only in directives--don't, yes, like that, yes, fuck yes.

When Raylan was drawing him out, Tim bent at the knees and wavered, came in bursts of quick
succession, and tipped forward. He ended up straddling Raylan with both legs.

Tim weighted himself on his good leg, then stepped off over Raylan. They were both grinning like fools after what they’d done.

And then--like Raylan had wanted--Tim found the discarded flannel shirt and pulled it on. Immediately, he pushed the too-long sleeves up his forearms, and frowned when he caught Raylan smiling at him.

“Thank you,” Tim said, feeling cornered. He must have, else he’d never have willingly made this admission. “For helping me. Giving me rides to places. Being around when I needed you. Being gone for,” Tim nodded towards the great, rolling hills, the backdrop to his month-long project. It didn’t escape Raylan that Tim’s comment was reminiscent of the request he made their first night home together, in bed, back when everything was awkward and new and hurting. Back when they were only coming to realize they’d both been burned by the decisions they’d made. Back when receiving help meant being lessened by it, and Tim put up a fight every time.

“For drinking with me,” Tim added, so as not to sound so earnest. It was something they only tangentially acknowledged since the scrapped weekend to Louisville.

Raylan toasted the air with his empty soda can. “Some might call that enabling.”

“I’m a bottle half-full kind of guy,” Tim said, and then in a wave of uncharacteristic sheepishness, he ducked his head and added, “And you drank the other half.”

Raylan didn’t laugh at him, but he did smile. “I love you too, Tim.”

It seemed the only appropriate response to what Tim had said—or rather, what Raylan had heard woven throughout the jocular line. “You know that, right?”

“I think so,” Tim said. His thoughtful tone made Raylan’s heart shrink. When Tim glanced his way, he was surprised to find Raylan looking offended—no, genuinely hurt. Tim made an appropriately shamed face, corrected, “I mean, shit. It looks that way.”

“So what’s the problem now,” Raylan sighed while leaning into Tim. Being tactile at this juncture, he knew, was necessary. “How am I still the fuck-up, here?”

“You say that like we ain’t a pair of ‘em,” Tim smirked. He started to smile, hearing Raylan’s proclamation over and over in his head—\textit{I love you, too}. An affirmation of Tim’s feelings, as well as Raylan’s own. While not the first Tim had heard or seen spelled out to him on the matter, it was perhaps the most plain. Uninspired, even, except that Raylan had never before said the words solely because, in the ebb and flow of a quiet conversation, he felt wholly inspired to do so.

Because they fit.

But Tim, for everything he wanted and was getting from Raylan many times over, still had his reservations.

Off in their view of the hills, a flock of birds shot up from the grass as though they’d been startled. Tim felt a bizarre stinging sense of foolishness; he’d seen the dark spots on the hill and assumed them to be wild flowers.

“I don’t think you can love me like the others,” he admitted.

“I didn't love a lot of them, Tim.” Raylan had no trouble speaking to the truth of his own
dalliances. He nudged Tim again, playful. “Only a select few.”

Tim tried to smile, but it looked like a poor imitation of what had once graced his features. That Raylan was a consummate flirt made all his efforts in this respect easy; Tim looked stiff as a nun in comparison. “Guess I could steal your money. Bear you a couple of towheaded tots.”

“I’d surely leave you, should that come to pass.” Of all the conversations they’d never had, or had much too late, Raylan thought this one might have cleared the path for a few things. "This ain't about you being a man."

"No, it's about you being a man." Tim stared squarely at him, reasoned, "My being a man has never been a problem in my relationships."

"What relationships," Raylan teased, then instantly regretted it. It was a poor choice of wording on Tim’s part, still, but by repeating it Raylan staked a claim.

Not everyone had an endless stream of past lovers pacing the penrose steps of their life like Raylan did. Raylan rightly assumed they each had scores of fun and dirty flings, one-night stands, and the like—if only by the virtue of Raylan knowing what he liked and Tim liking to try all that he knew.

But Tim's more intimate history was his own, whether it was brought to light or hidden. Or kept buried, as was Raylan's working impression. Tim talked of exes like they were dead, and Raylan got to thinking Tim wasn’t taking dramatic liberties; maybe they were.

"You think this was my first rodeo? Hat and boots excluded." Tim didn’t so much as blink as he made his simple admission. “Please. I've sucked cock on three continents."

“Not that I ain’t interested in hearing tales from the other two, but I ain’t talking blowjobs outside some bar, someplace." Raylan felt Tim rising to the occasion and very much wanting to make a numbers game out of their respective sex lives. Competitive by nature, Raylan was happy to tear down that path. “What panned out? In all these mythical relationships of yours.”

Tim hesitated, only just realizing now what he'd started. “We were young. Or he was married. Or our tours were up.” Or all three simultaneously—though Tim thought it best not to give so clear a picture. "But it felt necessary and important, every time. I loved them."

The confession took the fight from Raylan’s heart and put out the fire in his belly. Tim was no fun being sincere; it didn’t suit him. Or else, he didn’t take to it naturally, and instead always seemed pressed into such a place where honesty was confused for lamentations. Tim could never confess a good thing.

Raylan asked, “You tell ‘em so?”

“Not a lot of them," Tim said, and looked pointedly at Raylan. “Only a select few.”

“Tim Gutterson,” Raylan said the name like a vile swear first learned from older boys outside a church, making it all the worse. “Are you some kind of romantic?”

Tim narrowed his eyes; he was never that. A romantic might have left Raylan immediately for his indiscretions, or forgiven him outright. Romantics were finicky. Tim much preferred the direct approach of ruining things irreparably. That he came limping back, however, was a turn of events he was still working to navigate.

“My greatest personal failure," he drawled, and Raylan smiled tight like he knew Tim was trying to pull one over on him.
Raylan drew in his long legs, sat up a little straighter while Tim continued to lounge, albeit not so comfortably. "Let me tell you about a few of the people I loved."

Tim cut in fast with a joke: "The guy with the teeth? I mean, it goes without saying."

It came cloaked in a molasses drawl and a lazy hand gesture, but Tim envisioned it as a strong deterrent. Raylan, never one to be caught off guard, took the interruption in stride and continued: "One was just like me. That was about as pleasant as fucking sideways in an outhouse. One saw a lot of potential, and believed me when I said I thought I could be better. She believed me a couple times. Helped me believe it, too, unfortunately. And another one, well. He suffered through my delusions, then his own."

It was hardly the declaration of love Raylan had alluded to with his preface, but he wasn’t finished. He flicked his hat back so that his face joined Tim’s in the creeping sunlight. He smiled coyly, like he’d been touched by some divine knowledge that Tim could only hope to glean. Like it was something he’d never have confirmed for his own, and would simply have to trust Raylan’s saying so.

And to that point, Raylan said: "And then he fixed something for me. Not even--correct me if I’m wrong--as a favor. Just because he's like that."

Tim drew in a long, contemplative breath. "I think this fella’d appreciate another blow job. To start."

Raylan gave him an outright obscene smile. “Where are my manners?"

“I’m kidding.” Tim said while physically fending Raylan off where they sat on the porch. “Christ. This is uncomfortable.”

“Lying on the steps or all this deep talk?”

“I’m standing up, anyway."

Tim was pleased. Raylan suspected as much, and Tim’s quick exit confirmed it. It was a specialty of his--disappearing if the smile on his face wouldn't. He returned shortly from the house a bottle of bourbon under his arm, and two bottles of water--both gripped in one large hand because Tim would never put himself in a situation where he couldn’t reach for a weapon. Tim placed the bourbon on a chair sat flush against the house, like an incentive for sticking around longer than maybe Raylan would have liked.

Raylan, who was now stood leaning over the porch railing, gladly accepted his share of the bottled water, and saw clear through the bourbon and what Tim meant for it.

He cracked the cap and toasted Tim, said, “To happy endings. Well, mine.”

Raylan tipped his hat back again and enjoyed the passing sun as it briefly cleared through heavy cloud cover. Tim kept tight against the house, wary of the bright skies.

They stood for a time, watching the color pass over the sky as the grey receded elsewhere, gathering itself together as another storm front. Purple threaded itself throughout the distance, and a brassy color touched treetops and skirted over the shortened hills as the sun hugged the earth as long as it could.

Tim looked around the yard for any projects that had slipped his mind. He saw only Raylan's glossy black town car--because he never did anything quietly--and the crumpled paper bag from
the burger place had rolled off the porch and onto the grass. The wrinkled comforter draped down the steps made the place more hillbilly than it had looked since Tim first got his hands on it. Very Harlan harem chic.

There was, of course, Arlo’s trailer out along the other side of the house. Tim didn’t know what to do with that, except maybe join Raylan in driving it into a ravine.

“Coming back to the Marshal Service,” Raylan said, and with no preamble Tim recognized it as something he’d wanted to say for a while, worked it and reworked it. “You’ll be happy, then?”

Tim hated to disappoint him. “I’m a grown man, Raylan.”

“What’s that, an answer?”

“I know to leave well enough alone,” Tim said, and knew immediately he ought to have just lied. Yes, I’ll be happy. Yes, I’m inching closer to that mythical fucking finish line every day. Yes, I think I can be. He drained a third of his water. “I just want to do the job.”

“You can aim a little higher than that.” It wasn't something Raylan found he needed to remind Tim of—doing better, pushing himself harder. But Tim had a couple blind spots. “Do what will make you happy.”

Tim didn’t seem to take the comment personally. He smirked, said, “Imagine if someone said that to you.”

Raylan smiled, rescinded the request. “Point taken. It’s a fool’s errand.”

“No,” Tim paused, bent at the knee to pull at his jeans. Raylan followed his hand and saw that the prosthetic must have shifted, and was pinching the denim. He guessed that Tim would excuse himself, but he didn’t. He continued his conversation with Raylan, bent at the waist and working over his pants, saying simply, “I just mean—who the hell knows what that is. I’m trying.”

They couldn’t see the storm coming for the hills, but the smell of rain hit the air with a sudden ferocity that it might as well have dropped a hail storm over their heads. Tim had already shut the windows and doors, conscious of any warping of his last, best paintjob. Raylan thought that was too bad; he’d surround himself with this smell, if he could. Wet earth and shattered skies; it was particular to this country, to these very hills. Tim scanned the horizon, spied a far-away spark of lightning. The storm would carry on southward, maybe pass them by completely.

Tim smiled; that’d be something.

His pants were still partially unzipped, open to a pair of gray boxer briefs. Raylan hadn't paid much mind to the color when he was tearing past them to get to his prize. And now, he couldn't recall when a glimpse of underwear had stopped feeling particularly intimate, but Tim catching him looking was exactly that, and then some. And that, their shared moment of simple amusement, moreso than the underwear, was disconcerting. It wasn't something they'd experienced organically in some time.

So Raylan spoiled the moment, but for good reason. He was genuinely concerned that Tim seemed—in this moment—perfectly happy. “Do you want… to move out here?”

And for a brief moment in time, Raylan considered his own offer as feasible. He'd never again enter his childhood home, never lift a finger to care for what Arlo’s criminal enterprising had wrought, but he'd still somehow live here, with Tim. And he'd never stop atoning.
“Fuck no,” Tim said, first in confusion and then again, adamant, "Fuck no." Then he searched Raylan's expression for some hint of humor. Tim found nothing except total and willful promise, which made him a little sad. “I just want to be with you, wherever, for as long as I can.”

It wasn't the house Tim liked, but Raylan's connection to it. However fixed with ill will, Raylan always came back to it. “I don’t even got to be a Marshal. I could just do this.”

Raylan got the sinking feeling this might have been the conversation they'd had if Tim had told him about re-enlisting before he'd up and done it.

“You don’t want to just do this.”

“No,” Tim agreed, slow, like he thought he’d almost had something, there. A compromise Raylan didn’t have to meet him on.

Clouds curled and pulled into each other, then finally broke over a smattering of hills in the distance. There was a spark of God in the act, a kind of accelerated damnation true believers would see outright, but Raylan and Tim were only able to consider as bystanders.

“Reminds me of Afghanistan,” Tim said, frowning. Raylan never mentioned how Tim seemed to have purged his time in Iraq from his mind, seeing it only as a short and ill-conceived venture. Like it wasn't, in the similar vein of his multiple stints in Afghanistan, a part of his life, despite its very present consequences. “Sort of. Like how parts ain’t changed for centuries, won’t change for centuries to come.”

“I don’t know,” Raylan said. “Back in the day, those hills were surely mountains.”

Tim's eyes narrowed over the scene, and Raylan got the distinct feeling he was seeing a lot farther than Raylan had ever cared to look. If Tim could see a thing like that and still think, adventure, Raylan was happy for him. Raylan only saw the moral implications, the ways a place like this could turn a man against himself.

“No, something else about this place. That it's hard, I guess?” If Tim thought the view warranted a longer look, he didn’t think he ought to take one. He shrugged and turned back around, stood with his back to the railing, and spoke to the side of the house: “I don’t know. I like the view, is all.”

“I hated it,” Raylan said, settling his eyes on the same view he’d had from his bedroom window as a child. The hills spilled out in every direction, yet there was never any place for Raylan to go. His father darkened every corner of Harlan--if people knew him, people hated him. And Raylan felt that relationship impressed upon him from down the mines to his homeroom class, and everywhere in between. “Coming back here and seein’ nothing had changed.” Raylan shook his head. “Some things never do.”

Tim’s smile disappeared, replaced itself with a familiar look of cold readership. Like he’d just received bad news, and knew as much only from the unopened envelope, if not the contents. He drew his head back and opened his eyes to an imagined god--or something, whatever unearthly power had put Raylan in his life. Time, fate, the universe, the supernatural. Something vast and grossly unsatisfying had to be held accountable.

“You slept with someone,” Tim said, just a mere statement of fact. You slept with someone. It's raining. Tim could practically say the two interchangeably. “Again.” Something shook in his voice before he could sure himself up, which he did by standing straight-backed and widening his stance. “By accident, I’m sure.”
Raylan cocked his head slightly, bemused. “Come again?”

“You were high when you said you wouldn’t, so,” Tim looked Raylan in the eye, said dryly, “I guess there’s that.”

The world seemed to drop away from Raylan when he realized Tim was serious. Raylan felt entirely dormant in the scene that played out before him, and therein presented a problem: Raylan didn't know what the fuck Tim was on about.

"For fucks sake. Was it that easy?"

Tim plucked the bottle of bourbon he’d set out, but left both of the two glasses with it untouched. Brought all the way from Lexington three weeks ago, and Tim hadn’t touched a drop. It was his intended reward. He drank from it greedily, now, though it didn’t feel that way. Each burning swallow broke with an air of necessity.

“Hey,” Raylan warned, suddenly drawn to the shine on Tim’s lips, and not the accusations he was throwing around. He drew himself into the foreground, out of the fog of confusion Tim's outburst had left him in.

“You want me sober for this?” Tim’s mouth twisted around the word sober with a nasty little smile.

"For what! I didn't sleep with anyone.” Raylan’s intention was to wait, give Tim a chance to tire himself on these wild thoughts and circle back around to reality. But Raylan’s pride got out ahead of him, and threw off all reason and good sense. Raylan felt this place getting a hold of him once again as he snapped, “Hold on one fucking second. Was this a test?”

“No,” Tim said, his eyes now trained hard anything and everything but Raylan. The bourbon, the house, the hills. He couldn’t find one goddamn thing that didn’t come back to Raylan; intentionally or not, Tim had surrounded himself. “Funny you’d think that only after you failed.”

He didn't sound particularly angry, and his tone didn't rise or fall with frustration or heartbreak. He simply spoke, as paced and easy as though he'd long expected leading Raylan along on this very conversation.

It frustrated Raylan, to be sure. Talking with Tim was like hollering into an echo chamber and hearing nothing back.

“I didn't sleep with anyone, Tim. You’re going to have to take my word on that.” Raylan was being purposefully short with him, a tactic brought upon by stress, not forethought, because Tim wasn’t so far off. And now, Tim had cornered Raylan into answering for something Raylan believed was holy innocent. Would have been, too, if he’d gotten out ahead of it.

“I saw Winona. We had dinner, talked.” Raylan watched Tim’s face fall, and he tried to salvage his explanation: “Like you’ve done with her. Just… talking.”

"Raylan,” Tim bit out, “Don’t fucking lie to me.”

Tim’s anger had always been there, mostly channeled into Tim’s own recovery efforts, fueling every step that hurt like the first. Now it came unhindered, cast out of Tim’s body and towards a meatier target.

Tim felt thirsty, but knew it was fear clawing at his throat. He was reminded of his awful time spent on the kitchen floor, bleeding and drenched and feeling like, yet again, he’d lost a part of
himself for the mission. The thought, once given time to grow, now presented itself as a long-awaired punchline: Raylan was just another war that didn’t feel worth it.

"I didn't cheat, Tim," Raylan mulled over the words, thought about how much he hated saying them, and wondered bitterly how long it would be until they became a core part of his vocabulary. He stood firm, said nothing more on the matter. He would not plead his case; Tim would have heard him out, accept what he said now rather than give credence to things he imagined Raylan was keeping from him.

And slowly, with an accompanying nod that looked outright pained, Tim did come to believe him.

"Why’d you think I did?"

Raylan managed to ask the question in such a quiet tone, that Tim imagined they’d both sunk into a dream. It was a softer place than reality, and with his answer Tim benefitted from the easement.

"Your face," Tim said, his own expression miserable to match. "You looked guilty about something. What’d you talk about?"

Raylan wasn’t about to let him follow up an accusation with inane curiosity. "You can ask her."

Likewise, Tim knew better than to accept Raylan's attempt at passing the buck to Winona. "She loves you, she’ll cover for you."

"She thinks I haven’t been fair to you. Letting you do all this, least of all. She thinks... It won't last. I told her I wasn't so sure--you do the same work as I do, there are no illusions of safety. You know that. I know that." Honestly, Raylan thought he knew that better than anyone. "But she thinks I'll hurt you... Some other way."

"Let me guess."

Tim didn’t say so in a mean-spirited way; he felt like he'd been run-ragged, left tired and aching by his own eagerness to jump down Raylan’s throat. It was a humiliating venture for Raylan to parrot back the various ways and means his ex-wife thought he’d end up ruining his current relationship, but Tim’s part in bringing it about was no small blunder to live down.

Raylan specified: "She thinks I'm not kind enough for you. That you need someone nice."

Tim was particularly struck by that line of thought. "You're the nicest person I've ever met," he blurted out, and it sounded like an insult, though not necessarily directed at Raylan.

It broke apart the anger, anyway. And in the silence that followed, Tim scrubbed at his face like he thought he'd be better served just shedding this identity and starting anew.

"Should I be wary that the patron saint Winona, mother of your child, is giving you relationship advice as it pertains to me?"

Raylan shooked his head, even smiled a little. He never fell for the saintly types. "She’s done with me."

"What if she wasn’t?" Tim asked, because he’d long wanted to, and this was as shitty a time as any to voice his most private, deeply-held concerns about losing Raylan--for reasons good, bad, and simply convenient. “She’s gone and come back before. She cheated on Gary for you. You spurned Ava Crowder about that time, if memory serves. If she so much as considered thinking about maybe in a parallel universe taking you back… you’d be with her in a heartbeat.”
Staunchly, Raylan said, “I’m with you.”

“Until you’re not.”

Plainly, Raylan asked, “Do you hate me?”

Tim wanted to. He thought, maybe, that he should. That Raylan had earned this as much as he’d earned every little bit of his reputation as a gunslinger. “No, Raylan. And just my fucking luck, I don’t think I ever could.” Tim tugged at the buttoned front of his flannel; it was too snug, constricting in a way nothing about Raylan ever was. “But I can’t keep doing this,” he said. “Doubting you.”

“I never cheated on Winona when we were married.”

"I ain't your wife, I'm your partner." And in every sense of that word, Raylan had found ways to lie to him, to keep him in the dark and abuse his goodwill. “And I don’t want your hand, Raylan. I want your word.”

“I’ve given you that. And I don’t renege on it so easily. This is your hang-up, not mine.” It was a hard line for Raylan to take, but he felt assured in this, if nothing else.

Tim worried about winning this argument. What he'd come away with, if he did, and what he'd inevitably lose. Continuing the battle would only bring about more needless suffering, no matter how internalized and seemingly insignificant. Hurt feelings and betrayed trust would settle into fault lines, then eventually come to a head, rupture, and they’d both spill in. Tim took a breath, worked up the courage to toe the edge.

“If you do it again, I’m going to know. And the worst part is--you’ll know that I know.” Tim tipped forward over the porch railing, but the sunlight had gone, and his face only fell into more shadow. He spoke slow, punctuated his every point. “What am I gonna do then?”

Raylan knew Tim well enough to smile; Tim wanted a practical answer. Raylan wished he could give him one, but in all his life, it had never quite become clear to him: how do men love each other? The best Raylan could come up with was that he and Tim had a great attachment, furnished by desire and need and loyalty. It started with an unbreakable trust that grew out of the field, but hadn’t yet followed to their bed.

Raylan conceived an entire, masterful testament to love and loyalty, and how missteps didn’t wear the doctrine thin, but enforced its arguments. In Raylan’s mind, it was all very nearly pretty. And to save himself the counterargument of grandiose self-delusion, Raylan decided he’d rather impress the sentiments against Tim’s skin, fill him up with the kinder lines.

Which left him only the bare truth of the thing, which he shared: “You could walk a block away from me, Tim, and it’d break my heart.”

Tim smirked; of course Raylan would continue to work him even now, well after Tim had flayed him open and made a show of Raylan's flaws. “You promise?”

“You don't know. You weren't here.” Suddenly, Raylan was resolute and on the offensive. He’d shouldered Tim’s taunts because he’d deserved them, but Tim could stand to have a few thrown his way. “You don’t have every claim of mistreatment, okay? Sure as you, I got scars.” Raylan’s mouth twisted as he added, same serious tone as before, “Gonorrhea from that bartender.”

He said it to force a smile, which it surely did.
“And you let him serve us drinks.”

The jokes were only a slight departure from the hard truths they were circling, and the reality of the situation caught up to them quick. Raylan shook his head slowly. Going left and right, the angry look fixed on his face cemented itself in his handsome features.

It was trite, but--Tim sometimes thought Raylan was born to look that way.

"I wouldn't do that to myself again," Raylan said, his tone saturated in spite. “At least know that.”

Tim had the good graces to hush a moment after that one, appropriately shamed. For a time they watched the storm again as it carried on in the distance, slamming into hills like it meant to flatten them.

“Inscrutable,” Tim said of Raylan--another joke, but without any of the redeeming attributes of drawing from its audience amusement or laughter. Raylan stood as still and silent and death.

“Can I ask? Why?” Tim had asked around this question in every way, stalked it at a distance and skirted its very edges, He was only ready for the answer now, when they were just coming together again. It was as though he wanted to test the mettle of their bond, take a crack at it and find the fault lines.

Raylan did not want to chance it. He cautioned, “Come on, Tim.”

Raylan touched him again, just the tips of his fingers along Tim’s wrist and hand, where Tim gripped the porch railing with whitened knuckles. The kindness did not negate its purpose.

Tim pressed, seemingly unmoved, “What you’ve done is relevant, but your motives are incidental?”

“There’s no good answer for it,” Raylan argued. “As you’re well aware. As you’d tell me, second I opened my mouth, breathed the air into my lungs I’d need to even start to consider an excuse.”

He’d made his point, but still Tim waited, patient but insistent.

Raylan sighed, said, “I was lonely. And I didn’t think anything beyond just that.”

Still more silence spilled between them. Raylan envisioned a vast ocean, as great and terrible as the one Tim had crossed previously, when last he wanted Raylan to stop talking to him.

But then Tim swayed a little.

“That’s not nothing,” Tim allowed. And it--leniency --wasn’t the kind of thing he leaned towards in any respect. So Raylan supposed that meant maybe Tim had been tempted, too. Or else he, like Raylan, had done and regretted a slew of things in his past, well before their lives collided. Questionable bedfellows and uneasy nights, liquored up and feeling game for whatever--loneliness had a leading role in that production. It made the man himself ancillary, almost. A second-billed performer in his self-titled work.

Or maybe, Raylan realized with no scarcity of disappointment, it was just Tim trying to force forgiveness he wasn’t ready to settle for.

Whatever the reason, there was a part of Raylan that wished Tim had been this worn down and agreeable at the start.
“Tim,” he said, sorry that he had ever been disingenuous, “It’s bullshit.”

The air chilled as the wind picked up, and Tim was glad for the too-long sleeves on his borrowed shirt.

“I’m an asshole,” Tim said.

“Yep.”

“And you--Christ, such an asshole.”

“I thought we agreed earlier that it was a genetic thing.”

"I'm sorry," Tim said. "For the towel thing and this. Really."

Raylan bent and collected his hat, and only with it on did he seem to have the authority to say what he did: “The things you want, Tim, are fairly simple. And people are handing them out.” He added, “I’d walk away, same as you, if it wasn’t worth it.”

Tim glanced sidelong at him, said coolly, “So we’re in agreement.”

Raylan nodded, but not to anything Tim had said. He was thinking about the characters in books who slunk away in shame after their wrecked lives, disappearing themselves to a hard existence where their minds were too tired to wander back to what once was. Tim had gone to war, Raylan to bed. He was starting to understand, now, why so many retreated and so few returned to the battlefield. Nothing hurt worse than taking enemy fire from a loved one, and then feeling the need to hurl some right back.

Simultaneously, and without explicitly saying so, both Tim and Raylan laid down their arms. Raylan joined Tim at the porch railing, stood precisely at his side without presumption.

“Some of that talking I did with Winona had a point to it. If you’re interested, I’ll have Willa the first two weeks of August.”

“Oh.” Tim didn’t say anything else, but Raylan read everything into the short breath Tim took, after, and the way he’d squared his shoulders like he’d just been given orders.

Raylan pressed, “Don’t you want that?”

Tim raised his eyebrows, speculative. “Do you want me to want that?”

“Fucker,” Raylan grinned. Tim was loving this. He’d been wrong in jumping to conclusions, and things could have shook out poorly. Instead, Tim narrowly escaped destruction like he had so many times before. But somewhere, something in the backs of both their minds warned: awareness for disaster was lost on them both.

Then, because he wanted to know that Tim understood him, Raylan said: “Things going wrong ain’t the end of things going. Even if sometimes you wanted them to be.”

Tim frowned; he’d thought they’d both called it quits on the labored lecturing front. “I know that.”

“I know you do. This here’s just a friendly reminder.” Then, Raylan smiled wider and brighter than was natural for him. He turned too quick and altogether, it gave the effect of a clownish presentation. "Alright. Show me the house. Calhoun said the fireplace was a fucking revelation. Said he saw Jesus Christ in the stonework."
“No,” Tim said, hanging back. “Let’s head out.”

He nodded towards Raylan’s black town car, and although he hesitated, Raylan didn’t need to be told twice. He looked eastward, where the storm raged heavy and dark, and let himself pretend to think that his practically-minded partner hadn’t just held his heart in his hand and mercifully handed it back.

If Raylan needed to hate the place, Tim thought, let him.

Tim returned into the house to collect his personal sidearm and dufflebag. Both were near the door—in the three weeks he’d spent there, Tim had never unpacked—but he took his time to stalk around the main floor a spell. In the kitchen, Tim collected the few remaining tea towels belonging to Raylan’s late mother. He placed them neatly in his bag atop another fine layer of soft, faded things pilfered from Raylan’s old room. A baseball glove, some shirts. Just the odd thing Tim thought—whether Raylan eventually disposed of them in Lexington—shouldn’t be left to the hands and minds of others.

Tim knew a thing or two about regret for not taking time for a decision, even if he decided wrong either way. He secured his sidearm then shouldered his duffle, and left the grand old house for the sleek car parked at its edges. Even though the ever-present bluegrass station was in a lock of weather coverage, Raylan still searched for classic rock.

Rain started to pelt the windshield just as Tim dropped into the passenger seat.

“Fifty bucks says I can outrun it,” Raylan grinned. Tim saw that the bottle of bourbon he’d guzzled from now sat tantalizingly in the center console cup holder.

“Your pension says we die trying.”

A lot of the things he kept at arm’s length—Willa, the expectation of Raylan’s commitment—were only possible, not probable. They felt good when he had them. Stripped away, Tim felt less like himself. They were good for him to want, and if he accepted that he might never have either, he could still be happy trying. If it was only his heart at stake, it was worth risking.

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